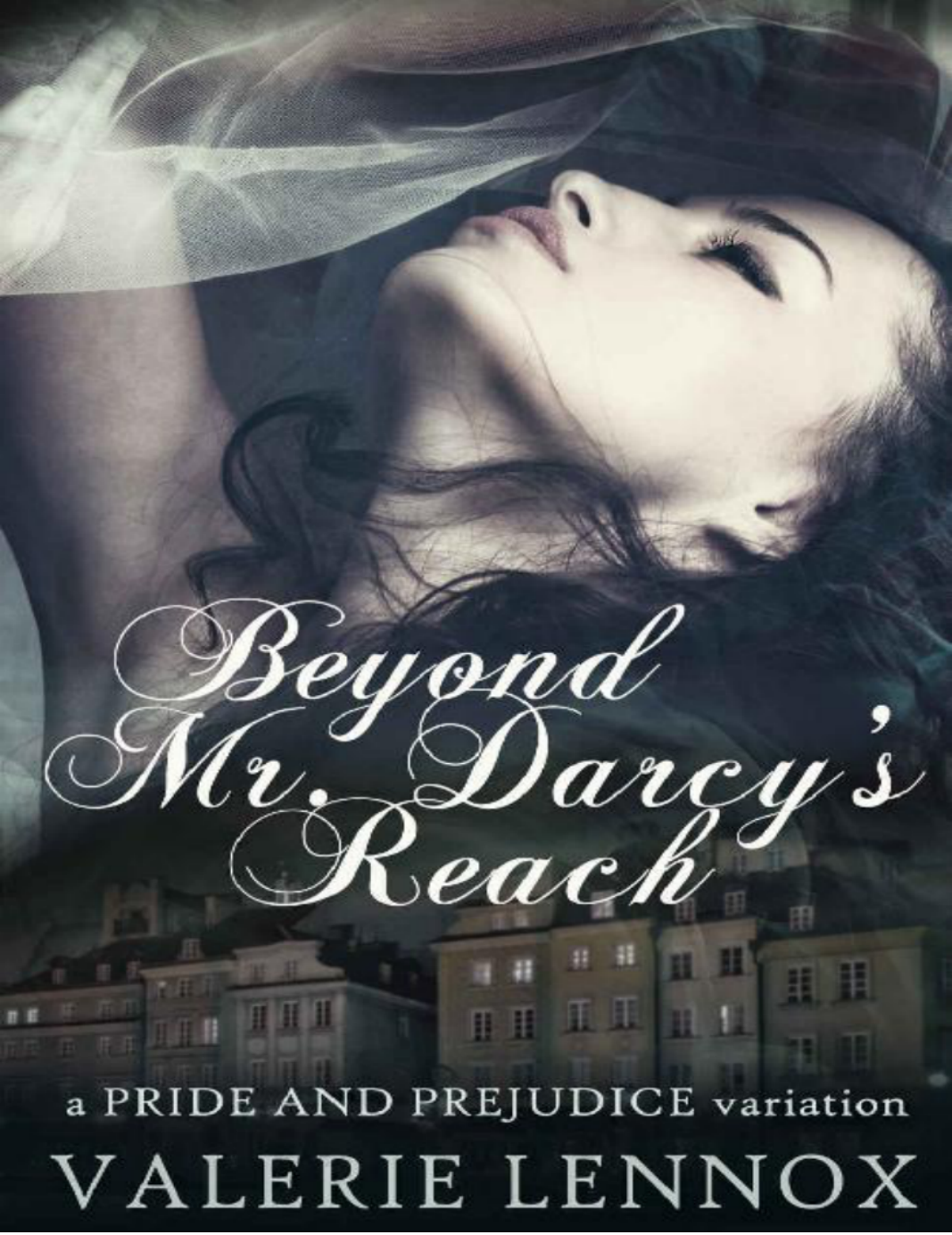

Beyond
Mr. Darcy's
Reach
a PRIDE AND PREJUDICE variation
VALERIE LENNOX

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Beyond Mr. Darcy's Reach

a Pride and Prejudice variation

Valerie Lennox

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CHAPTER ONE

Brussels
June, 1815

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was meant to be at a ball.

Perhaps it was a peculiar activity to be participating in during wartime, but it was welcome all the same. Richard had spent too much time in the army encampment, too much time in the company of men, in dirty roughness coupled only with spats of violence, and he craved a bit of civilization.

He had only taken this room at this inn for the express purpose of readying himself for the ball, which was being held by the Duchess of Richmond in a rented house not a quarter of a mile away. He could not ready himself in an encampment. He had the room for the entire night, and he did suppose that he might come to sleep there after the ball ended, but such a thing would be very late indeed, as the dinner itself wouldn't be served until midnight, and there would be dancing for hours afterward. He would not fully be able to take advantage of the bed, he had supposed.

Now, of course, he was using the bed, but not for sleeping.

No, instead, he was tupping a woman.

He was inside her at that very moment. His face was pressed into the skin of her neck. She was panting. He was panting.

He was most assuredly not at the ball where he was meant to be attending.

It had been some time since Richard had been with a woman, and maybe that could excuse his behavior, but even so, he was not usually so uncontrolled when it came to such things. The entire enterprise was actually quite odd. He would not typically be seized with unbridled desire at the sight of a woman. He would not typically pursue her against all reason. And he would not typically pay so damnably much for having her.

She had told him that she was more than he could afford.

He'd seen her in the hallway of the inn. She was masked, and perhaps that was the reason that she caught his eye. She must have been preparing for a masquerade ball. He knew that some of the lower

classes of the soldiers frequented such things, and that all the women there were whores.

This woman, from the look of her, had to be a doxy. Her manner of dress and her carriage proclaimed it. What was more, she wasn't the sort of high-class courtesan that Richard might typically pursue and excuse himself for having done so. She was quite obviously situated somewhere in the middling area of strumpets, and she shouldn't have been the least bit remarkable.

And yet, he had followed her.

She had rounded a corner, and he had nearly lost sight of her, and he had been beside himself. He had doubled his speed in order to catch her up, and then there she had been, in the doorway of a room.

She had put her hands on her hips. "Colonel Fitzwilliam," she'd said.

He'd sputtered. "You know me?"

She'd laughed. "We had occasion to meet, a long time ago. But do run along, sir. When we last spoke, you could not afford to have me, and I doubt that has changed."

He had no notion of what she spoke of, and he had demanded that she take off her mask or to introduce herself or something of that nature, and she had refused all of it.

It had put him rather in a frenzy. He was seized with a violent desire for her, and he'd immediately begun to attempt to cajole her into a liaison with him.

She'd refused flatly.

This had only stirred his ardor to a fever pitch. Now, he was half-mad for the woman, even though, by all rights, he shouldn't be. He couldn't allow her to say no to him, so he began to beg, to offer her higher and higher sums of money, far higher than made any sense.

Finally, she named an even higher sum—a ridiculously high sum.

But she agreed.

Now, they were in his bed. He was not entirely undressed. His trousers were pulled down and his shirt was unbuttoned. Similarly, she was not entirely uncovered. Her dress had been pushed down to bare her breasts and her skirts were up around her waist.

The event was proceeding at a breakneck pace, and he could not say he was regretting it. There was something about this woman, something intoxicating, and he felt almost vindicated for having somehow secured her.

She was still wearing the mask. She had insisted upon that. It was her most important stipulation. He had wanted it off of her, and she refused so adamantly that he had eventually put the request to rest.

Now, he lifted his face to look down at her, to kiss her, and suddenly—

But his climax overtook him suddenly, out of nowhere, in an unpleasantly fierce fashion, and he shut his eyes, grunting.

It stole her name from his lips.

Elizabeth Bennet.

He moved away from her, fumbling with the French letter he was wearing, now in an ecstasy of confusion and shame and horror.

It couldn't be.

And yet it was. How had he not seen it before? Even in her mask, it was obvious. He knew this woman. A flimsy piece of fabric over her eyes and most of her nose was not enough to obscure her identity. He should have recognized her straightaway.

It was only that he would never expect to see Elizabeth Bennet here in Brussels, and he would never expect her to be selling her body.

And besides all that, she was dead.

The French letter fell into the chamberpot, and he tucked himself into his trousers. His face was hot.

She was already somehow back together, her dress covering all of her body. She was scooping up the money that they had agreed upon, that he had counted out onto the table near the door.

"Wait." His voice was hoarse.

She didn't even look at him. "This was a mistake, sir." Her voice wasn't strong either. She was out the door, her fist full of money, not even waiting to tuck it away. She was fleeing from him.

He lurched after her.

She hurried down the hallway.

He went after her.

Only to be intercepted by a man in uniform, calling out, "Colonel! It's Napoleon, sir. Word has already gone to Wellington. We'll be fighting before dawn, I expect."

"What?" Richard turned to the man, utterly surprised. "But Wellington is at the ball."

CHAPTER TWO

London
July, 1815

"And weren't you frightened?" Maria Lucas's eyes were wide as she set down her tea cup. Maria was visiting Elizabeth in town. She lived in the country now with her two children, in a home purchased for her by the children's father, an earl, who was not Maria's husband. The earl was, in fact, married to someone else. Even so, Maria was happy enough with the arrangement.

"Well, of course I was," said Elizabeth. "But I had to keep my wits about me, and I had rather a great deal of money, so it was not difficult to use my means to find a way home and away from the melee." She was speaking of the chaos that had descended in Brussels upon the announcement that the troops were marching to Waterloo. Everyone who was not a soldier had decided to leave at once, and finding a way out had been difficult.

"A great deal of money, hmm?" Maria raised her eyebrows, amused. "So, your scheme was successful?"

"Oh, well." Elizabeth sighed. "Sort of."

"I suppose, in order to secure your way home, you had to part with more of that 'great deal of money' than you cared to part with," said Maria.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "but that is not why it was only sort of successful. The truth was, when it came down to it, I was rather too picky about the men. I simply… oh, I don't know. It has been so long since I've felt the need to resort to such things for money, and I'm afraid that I didn't bed nearly as many soldiers as I meant to."

"No? But then where did the money come from?"

"Most of it came from one encounter," said Elizabeth. "An encounter for which I was paid rather handsomely, but… oh, dear, it was dreadful."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No, nothing like that." Elizabeth picked up her own cup of tea. She had not been able to provide a lavish tea spread for her guest, so she only had out bread and butter and and a few biscuits—simple ones

that she could make easily enough. Anything eaten in this house she cooked herself, and she was not what anyone would term skilled in the kitchen. “I knew him. Well, for that matter, you have met him too. We have both dined with him, in fact.”

“Someone we both know?”

“Someone from before,” said Elizabeth.

Maria sat up straight. “But… I don’t understand. That can’t be. If someone from… from *before* recognized you—”

“I was masked,” said Elizabeth. “He did not know who I was. I should not have even spoken to him. But it is only that sometimes I think about men from before, and I wonder about them, you know? Rather wicked sorts of wonderings, like what they might look like divested of their waistcoats and shirts or how large their pricks are.”

Maria tittered.

“Do you ever wonder such things?” said Elizabeth.

“I think of no prick other than Philip’s,” said Maria primly, snatching up a piece of bread.

Elizabeth snorted.

“I don’t,” protested Maria, spreading butter on her bread. “Well, then, how large was it?”

Elizabeth’s snort deepened into full-fledged laughter.

“Come now, you started it,” said Maria. “Were you surprised or disappointed?”

“That is hardly the point,” said Elizabeth.

“Isn’t it?” said Maria. “It was frightfully small, I suppose? That’s why the encounter was dreadful.”

“No, it was adequate,” said Elizabeth. “A perfectly normal-sized male member. That is not why it was dreadful. It was dreadful because… because I wished I never saw him undressed. I wished I hadn’t agreed to allow him to have me. I wished that I hadn’t become that to him. It made me feel soiled in the most awful of ways, as if some piece of my soul—perhaps the last bit of innocence within me—had been thoroughly destroyed. I wished I had never agreed to it, even though he paid me… Lord, he paid me quite well.”

Maria gave her a sympathetic look. “It was Mr. Darcy, wasn’t it?”

“*No!*” Elizabeth’s response was immediate and forceful. She set down her tea cup with a clatter. “I would *never* allow Mr. Darcy into my bed. I couldn’t *bear* such a thing. Heavens, that you would even suggest—”

“Yes, what am I thinking? What would Mr. Darcy be doing at the Battle of Waterloo? It was the other one, that colonel. What was his name?”

Elizabeth didn’t say anything.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Maria sipped at her tea, her voice soft.

"Well," said Elizabeth, "it is done now, and I can't take it back. And I shall stay well clear of any place where he would frequent. I daresay I shall never see him again, and that is as it should be. I must simply forget it ever happened, I think."

Maria eyed her, tilting her head to one side.

"Don't look upon me that way," said Elizabeth, picking up her tea cup again. It was nearly empty. She set it down and began refilling it.

"How am I looking at you?"

"You *know* how you're looking at me," said Elizabeth crossly. She heaped too much sugar in with her tea.

"I wish you'd come back to the country house and meet the earl's brother again," said Maria in a quiet voice.

"No, no," said Elizabeth. "I can't be as you are, Maria, and you know it is not because I judge you for it, for I don't, but because I simply couldn't bear the lack of independence."

"I am independent enough." Maria raised her eyebrows. "I have the deed to my house, after all. The earl gave it to me as insurance should an accident befall him. And he has been quite generous with trusts for the children."

"Yes, well, he loves you," said Elizabeth.

"You could find love as well," said Maria.

"I don't want love," said Elizabeth. She was not pleased with how sulky her voice sounded, even to her own ears. "You spoke of my scheme already. You know what it is that I hope to accomplish."

"Yes," said Maria, nodding. "And if you ever do put together the full amount of money, then I think it will be quite splendid for everyone, and I shall be very happy for you. But, by your own admission, you dislike taking men to bed, so how is it that you plan to earn the rest of the amount that you need?"

Elizabeth squared her shoulders. "Simply because I dislike it doesn't mean that I shan't do it if I have to." She struggled not to grimace. "I shall do what is necessary, and I shall soon put all this behind me and have a lovely small house in a better part of town." She had an amount in her head, one she thought reasonable, that could provide for her for the rest of her days. Once she had amassed it, she would quit this house in this part of the city, move somewhere more respectable, and then she could put all this behind her.

"And what if you find yourself with child?" said Maria quietly.

"Well, that could easily happen with the earl's brother." Elizabeth glared at her.

"Yes, but he would look after you," said Maria. "He is a good man, and he is rather nice to look upon, at least I think so, and he always asks after you. I think he is already half in love with you. It would likely not take much. Perhaps he would settle you somewhere nearby

me, and then we could broach the subject with your family, who will have certainly heard by now about my situation—"

"But you can never go home again, Maria," said Elizabeth. "Your parents have come to see you, and they do dote on their grandchildren, but they cannot formally acknowledge you. And Charlotte will not—"

"Well, that is only because of her horrid husband," said Maria. "I have entertained most of my other siblings in my house. It is enough, Elizabeth. You want something that may never be possible. After what was done to us, we can never be respectable again, not truly."

Elizabeth looked into her tea cup. She didn't argue. Perhaps her scheme would not work, or perhaps she would not be believed. But even if so, she would at least have the security of her own money. She would not have to depend upon anyone, not the way Maria did. She looked up at the other woman. "You have not ever hinted a word about me, have you?"

"Of course not! They all think that I have no notion what became of you. They all think you are dead."

"Good," said Elizabeth.

"I can't believe you would think that I would say anything otherwise."

"No, of course you wouldn't." Elizabeth sighed. "My apologies, Maria."

"If you ever change your mind about Philip's brother, you must simply write to me," said Maria.

"I won't change my mind."

"But if you do," said Maria. "If you do, I'm sure something can be arranged."

* * *

Richard lifted his chin, trying to look imperious.

"But were you expected, sir?" said the footman at the door of Pemberley, a quizzical expression on his face. "Because none of the staff were informed that you were coming, at least not to my knowledge."

"No, I was not expected," said Richard. "However, Mr. Darcy is my cousin, and so is Mrs. Darcy, for that matter. I am family—*close* family. Rather more a brother than a cousin, I should think, and so I do not need to announce my visits, and frankly, I do not know why I need to explain such a thing to a footman. Do you truly mean to bar my way from the door, sir? After I have traveled such a far distance on horseback? Why, when your master discovers how you have treated me, he will not be pleased, I can assure you."

The footman blinked. "My apologies, sir." He stepped away from the door. "Do come in."

Richard crossed the threshold of Pemberley, removing his hat. Inside, he looked up at the high ceilings and the portraits of the Darcy line that dominated the walls. He felt a little queasy.

Perhaps I don't have to tell him, he thought.

It wasn't a new thought. He'd been having the same internal debate for weeks now. The war was over, and Napoleon was defeated, but he was not free entirely of his duties. He was on leave now, but he would be called back to duty in some months because there were still things to be seen to, even if the war was done. There were surely better things to do with his leave than this. Why he had traveled immediately to see Darcy without even stopping to see his mother was frankly beyond him.

Especially when he didn't even want to confess to Darcy what he'd done.

Perhaps I can simply say that I saw her, he thought. This was not a new thought either.

But no, no, no. Because Darcy needed to understand the gravity of the situation. He needed to understand that Elizabeth Bennet was alive and also in peril. He needed to know how low she had stooped.

Yes, but I could simply say that I saw her with another man, he thought.

It was likely best not to tell Darcy that he'd taken Elizabeth Bennet to bed. Not when the death of Elizabeth Bennet had destroyed Darcy. Not when Darcy had mourned the woman as though she'd been his beloved. Not when…

Oh, Lord.

The footman had said something, but Richard had not caught it. He didn't beg the man's pardon, however. He only sniffed, continuing to attempt to hold his imperious expression.

The footman wasn't paying attention, however, and turned and walked off into the house, leaving Richard alone.

Now, what was that about? Oughtn't he at least have shown Richard to a sitting room? How abominably rude. When Richard did see Darcy, he was going to have words with him about that footman. Of course, Richard didn't remember the man's name. He'd have to describe him. Yes, of course. Now, what color had the fellow's hair been?

"Richard?"

Richard looked up to see that the man himself was coming down the stairs.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy hurried toward him. "Were we expecting you? I don't remember hearing—"

"No, I just came," said Richard, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

Darcy's face broke into a huge smile and he rushed over to

enthusiastically shake Richard's hand. "I could hug you, you old cad. I hadn't heard a thing about whether or not you'd come through the battle all right. Couldn't you have sent word? It is so very good to see you."

Richard couldn't help but smile too. "I'm quite sorry about that. I'm afraid I was distracted by…" He sighed. "Oh, Darcy, is there someplace we could talk?"

"Of course," said Darcy. "Let me send someone to fetch Anne. I'm sure she—"

"No." Richard shook his head.

Darcy raised his eyebrows, taking a step back.

"I have things to tell you that are not meant for your wife's ears," said Richard. "Things that are not meant for anyone's ears but yours."

Darcy rubbed his chin, worry crossing his countenance. "This sounds rather ominous."

Richard swallowed. "It is." Then he considered. "I suppose, from a certain point of view, however, it might be thought good news."

"You have me quite curious. Let's go to my study, then."

"Lead the way," said Richard.

Several moments later, the two were ensconced in Darcy's study. Darcy had offered to ring for tea and refreshments, but Richard had said that wasn't necessary.

Moments later, he'd changed his mind but said they might each do with just a few fingers of brandy.

"I am becoming exceedingly agitated," said Darcy, pouring the brandy. "What is this about?"

"It's about Elizabeth Bennet."

Mr. Darcy knocked over a glass, spilling brandy all over the rug near his desk. "Oh," he said. "Dash it all."

Richard got up from the leather chair where he was sitting. "You'd best let me pour the drink, then. You sit down."

Darcy looked up at him, nostrils flaring. "Out with it."

"Sit down," said Richard.

Darcy sat.

Richard set the glass upright and poured. He handed it to Darcy. "She's alive."

"You saw her?"

Richard poured himself some brandy. "Yes."

"Where?"

"Brussels."

"Brussels?"

"Brussels."

"But…" Darcy upended the brandy into his mouth and swallowed.

Richard took the glass and refilled it. "There's more. It's not good,

I'm afraid."

"What was she doing there?"

"She was a doxy."

Nothing from Darcy.

Richard looked at him.

His face had gone white. His hand shook and he upended the glass into his mouth again.

"I'm sorry," Richard muttered.

"What do you mean?" said Darcy. "How do you know?"

"I saw her."

"You saw her, doing what exactly? It's not as if you saw her on her back with some soldier between her legs."

Richard poured himself more brandy.

"Did you?"

"No," said Richard. "Not… exactly. It's… I'm certain she's selling herself, let's leave it at that."

"So, where is she? Why didn't you do something?"

"Do something? What do you mean?"

"You should have approached her and put her under your protection and brought her back to England and to safety. You left her there? You did nothing?"

"I was rather busy fighting a war."

Darcy folded his arms over his chest.

Richard rubbed the back of his neck. "Listen, I didn't recognize her at first. She was wearing a mask. She… I thought she was dead, and how could I have known—"

"You're certain that she's a bawd?"

"Yes, I am."

Darcy narrowed his eyes. "And *how* are you certain?"

Richard couldn't meet his gaze.

"Oh, no, Richard, you can't mean to say…"

Richard cringed. How had he put it together? He held up both of his hands to ward off his cousin. "I had no notion it was her, Darcy, I *swear* to you—"

"You *didn't*." Darcy was on his feet.

"I am so, so sorry. You can't understand how abominably awful I feel about—"

"You are a wretch," said Darcy, whose face had turned a shade of red that might have been more properly termed purple. "You are a dreadful blackguard of the worst nature and—"

"If I had but known who she was, I would never have—"

"I want you *out*." Darcy pointed at the door.

Richard took a breath. Then he turned away and started for the door to the study.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Darcy thundered.

“You said that—”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know,” said Richard. “She ran away from me. She does not know that I identified her. For whatever it’s worth, she was quite resistant to me. It took me a quarter hour of negotiation to get her to agree, and the price I haggled was—”

“Oh, for God’s sake, stop talking.” Darcy sank back into his chair. He seized the brandy and took a drink directly from the bottle. He shut his eyes, clutching the bottle to his chest. “You were going to keep it from me?”

“Can you blame me?”

“Why come to me with it at all, then?” Darcy’s voice was hard.

“We have to *find* her.”

Darcy’s eyes snapped open. He sat up straight. “Yes,” he said in a different voice. “Yes, we do.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy bent over the desk in his study, working through a set of figures as quickly as he could. He had planned to take his time with the books, to go through each of them at a leisurely pace over the next week and a half, taking perhaps a quarter hour each day to peruse them before turning to other business. But now that he would be leaving Pemberley, he wanted to finish it going through them tonight. He could, of course, take the ledgers with him to town, but he did not think that he would have time to attend to them while he was seeking out Elizabeth. Furthermore, he did not think that he would be in any presence of mind to do so.

For that matter, he likely wasn't in the presence of mind to do it now, but he needed something to occupy his mind besides the myriad of questions that plagued him.

How could she be alive?

Where had she been all this time?

What had she been doing in Brussels?

How were they going to find her?

It wasn't assured that she would even be in London, after all. She could still be abroad, but Richard thought it likely that she had traveled with the soldiers, as many of the women had, and he said that everyone who had been with the company of men in Brussels had fled the morning of the battle, and he was fairly certain she would have too.

There was a faint knock on Mr. Darcy's study door, so faint that he ignored it.

He shook himself, forcing such thoughts from his mind. He did not need to think through all of the arrangements he and Richard had made together again. Lord knew, he had thought through them too many times already. He needed to focus on these figures. That was all.

The door opened.

He looked up, irritated.

"Mr. Darcy," said the woman in the doorway.

"Mrs. Darcy," he said by way of acknowledgment, and then went back to his ledger. Marrying his cousin Anne, the former Miss de Bourgh, had never been part of his plan, but it had somehow

happened. He had gone into a fugue state and then surfaced after some time, as if from deep water, and he'd been married.

Perhaps that wasn't quite a fair way to explain how it had happened.

He did have some memory of deciding that he would do it and of proposing to her. He remembered the wedding and everything that had gone along with that. But when he looked back on it all, he didn't think he'd really been in his right mind when he'd made those decisions. He had been mired in grief and hopelessness, and he shouldn't have made such an irreversible commitment at such a time.

A few people had tried to talk him out of it, if he remembered correctly.

Bingley, for instance, had sat him down and said that he was being hasty, and that he should wait a bit before making the proposal. Richard had also advised waiting.

Darcy had ignored everyone, however. He supposed that at the time, he'd felt the world so bleak that he thought nothing mattered at all. He was certain that he could never love another woman, and so he thought that marrying Anne was the best compromise. She wouldn't expect it of him. She would know it was a match made of duty, for the sake of family.

"Your valet is packing your things," said Anne.

"I'm well aware of this." He dipped his pen in its inkwell and scratched out a number on the ledger, writing the correction next to it.

"You ought to share with me when we are preparing to make a journey," she said. "Otherwise, how am I to also tell my servants what to pack for myself?"

He lifted his head. "I'm going alone." He paused. "Well, with Richard, anyway." He went back to his ledger.

"Alone?" said Anne. "But you never take me anywhere."

He stared at the numbers written out on the page. "We're going to town, and it's summer. Parliament has just ended its session. London will be hot and sweaty and horrid, and no one will be there anyway. Anyone with any sense will be in the country."

"Did you know I've never been to London?"

He lifted his head again to look at her, because her words sounded as though she must be making a jest, but her tone was quite serious. Her expression was serious too. He furrowed his brow. "Don't say preposterous things."

"It's true," said Anne. "Mama would never take me herself. I don't think she liked it there. She also would often use the excuse that I was too delicate for travel."

"Just so," said Darcy, going back to his sums. "I'll say goodbye to

you after breakfast. Now, I'm quite busy at the moment, I'm afraid, so if you don't mind closing the door on your way out?"

"I should like to go," said Anne. "I'm sure there is room in the carriage. You wouldn't forbid me from coming along, would you?"

His shoulders sagged. She had to put it like that, didn't she?

He and his wife hadn't had a great many conversations, truly, but after Anne's mother, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had passed on, the two had sat up talking nearly the whole of the night before Lady Catherine's funeral. Anne was quite confused about her response to her mother's death. She felt guilty because she thought that she was not properly sorrowful about it. She confessed that she felt a strange sense of relief at the woman's passing, even though she mourned her and would miss her greatly.

Darcy had reassured his wife that Lady Catherine was not the easiest of people to love. He had listened when Anne had spoken to him of feeling as though sometimes her mother acted not as a parent, but as a jailer. Anne had said that she'd been shuffled from her mother's household into her husband's household, and that she'd never had much say over her life thus far.

Darcy had promised that it would not be that way, that he would not be as forbidding as Lady Catherine had been. He had meant it too. He thought that it was a shame he could not give poor Anne love. At least he could give her freedom and new experiences.

Darcy set his pen down. "No one will be there. It is mid-summer, darling, and Parliament has ended its session. There will be no balls, no dinner parties, no whist games. It is not as you are envisioning it. Why don't you stay home now, and I promise, we shall spend the Season in town, hmm?"

"If no one will be there, why are you going?" said Anne.

He grimaced. He was not likely to tell her that he was going to hunt down another woman, the woman who had struggled in vain not to love, the woman who had broken something inside him, the woman who was supposed to be dead. "It's business," he said. "Boring business. And it will occupy me entirely. I shall have no time to entertain you."

Anne scoffed. "When do you entertain me, husband? Indeed, when do I see you as it is?"

"We see each other," said Darcy, feeling affronted by this.

"No, we don't," said Anne. "I won't be in your way, Mr. Darcy, I promise. But I'm coming along to London with you. I've already told my maid to begin packing."

"Of course you have." Darcy was resigned to it. "Well, Mrs. Darcy, we shall leave tomorrow after breakfast, then."

She smiled, and when she smiled, she looked young and almost

beautiful, even with her wan face and dull brown hair.

It was so easy to please her, wasn't it?

Darcy felt a stab of guilt for all of it. This marriage of his was not the picture of wedded bliss and companionship, and he knew that. It wasn't Anne's fault, though. He was the one in the wrong, and he should improve his behavior.

He didn't see how he was going to do that, now, though, not when he was carting her off on his own wild goose chase to find Elizabeth. He was already single-mindedly absorbed with that purpose and nothing more.

* * *

After three days, Mr. Darcy began to suspect they were on a fool's errand.

After a week, he was sure of it.

By all rights, they ought to have stopped looking. There was no indication that Elizabeth Bennet resided in London, or that she frequented any of the places that he and Richard had gone to seek her. Indeed, Darcy was half-convinced that they must travel to Brussels, for that was the place that she had last been seen, and that was where they could find some clue to her whereabouts.

But Richard told him there was nothing to discover there. After all, he had left from there after the battle, and he had looked for her before embarking on his journey back to England. He said there was no sign of her there.

No, Richard said that they must continue their search in London, for that was the place she was most likely to be. He went backwards, tracing what he thought must have become of her.

"Look," Richard said, "we know that the post coach in which she and Maria Lucas traveled was set upon by highwaymen."

"We do?" said Darcy, who had not been aware of this.

"How can you not have been told of this?" said Richard. "How is that I know about it when you do not?"

"Who told you of it?" said Darcy. "I thought Maria Lucas was considered dead as well. I am all astonishment at this."

"I was told by Lady Catherine, of course," said Richard. "Perhaps she did not see fit to tell you of it since you had recently married her daughter. She likely knew it would have given you hope of Elizabeth."

"Well, tell me of it now," Darcy instructed Richard. "And start at the beginning."

"I *was* starting at the beginning," said Richard. "Their carriage was set upon by highwaymen."

"Yes, but how is it that Maria Lucas appeared, when she was just as lost as Elizabeth and indeed as every axle and wheel of that damnable coach?"

“Well, she is the mistress of the Earl of Phynncliff,” said Richard.

“How did she become a mistress to an earl?”

“Well, I would come to that if you let me tell it in the order that I wish to tell it!” said Richard.

Darcy sighed. “Fine. As you will, then.”

“All right,” said Richard. “The coach was set upon, and Miss Lucas was molested. Her reputation ruined, she dared not seek her family again and so she had to seek protection where she might, and she happened into the arms of an earl, happily.”

“Happily indeed,” said Darcy. “How does a ruined and molested woman manage such a thing? And what happened to Elizabeth?”

“Well, Miss Lucas doesn’t know,” said Richard.

“How did Lady Catherine know this?”

“Are you going to let me tell the story or not?”

Darcy sighed again. “Fine. Continue.”

“All right,” said Richard. “Let me see, where was I? Ah, yes, so Miss Lucas had no notion what became of Elizabeth. She was rather occupied with being molested, I suppose, and she was not keen with giving details on all of that, as one might suspect.”

“And who did she give these details to?”

“Her family, of course,” said Richard.

“Ah,” said Darcy. “Which is how Charlotte Collins would have discovered it, I suppose, and then her husband fed it all to Lady Catherine. Naturally, I suppose the Collinses have formally cut Miss Lucas from their society?”

“Naturally,” said Richard. “Lady Catherine sang the praises of them for their virtue even in the face of familial love and tender feelings.”

Darcy snorted. “Oh, that seems like the sort of thing our aunt would say.”

“As if you wouldn’t do the same thing,” said Richard.

“Oh, it is not up to men to cut people from their society.” Darcy waved this away. “Women are the keepers of that nonsense.”

“I beg to differ,” said Richard, looking him over. “You, Darcy, are rather the most proper fellow of my own acquaintance if I do say so myself, and—”

“It is quite another thing if it is a woman who has been through misfortune!” Darcy protested.

“And would you say this if you weren’t assuming the same thing hadn’t happened to your precious Elizabeth?”

Darcy didn’t answer.

“Miss Lucas contacted her parents upon the birth of her first child,” said Richard. “She told them the whole sordid story, but she seems to have landed well on her feet. The earl has given her a cottage in the country. She holds the deed. It is in her name. And there is another

child yet, so she has the man's favor, I suppose."

"And she knows nothing of Elizabeth."

"Nothing at all."

"We should go and speak to her," said Darcy.

Richard raised his eyebrows. "Visit her? Call upon her? Truly?"

"Yes. Don't you think she might be able to give us more help than anyone else could?"

"She doesn't know about Elizabeth."

"Oh, well, maybe that's true and maybe it isn't," said Darcy.

"You think Miss Lucas is lying?"

"Likely Elizabeth is ashamed and does not wish to tar her own family name with what she has become. Likely, if she was in that same coach with Miss Lucas, she met with the same fate. Likely, she has charged Miss Lucas not to say anything about her for fear of consequences being visited on her loved ones."

Richard considered. "It's possible, I suppose."

"You know where this cottage is?"

"I could find out," said Richard.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the end of the week, Richard had the location of the cottage, which was not too far away from London, only about an hour's journey by carriage. Richard supposed that the earl wished to have his mistress close by.

He didn't hold with having mistresses in that fashion. He thought it was all very silly, a mistress with her own house and her own passel of one's children, like a second, secret wife. Or not-so-secret, as was likely the case in current society. It seemed ridiculous to him. Surely one wife was wife enough for a man. Why add to the misery by doubling it?

Once a man was supporting a woman and siring children on her, the relationship changed and matured in rather dreadful ways, and that didn't sound much fun to Richard. Mistresses, he thought, ought to be fun.

It didn't matter, because he was never going to be wealthy enough to keep one.

It did make him wonder what was to become of Miss Bennet once she was found. *If* she was found, that is. Would Darcy take her as a mistress?

It would seem as if the answer was evident. Darcy had lost his mind when he thought the woman dead, killed in some possible carriage accident. No one had been sure what had happened. The young ladies had departed from Kent in a post chaise, and then they had never arrived at their destination. Searches for the chaise had produced nothing. All of the people who had been on it, including the drivers, were missing. Their luggage was gone. The horses were gone.

It was as if a hole had opened up somewhere along the road and swallowed the chaise whole.

Of course, there was some thought given to highwaymen. The most likely scenario was that they had killed everyone aboard, buried the bodies, and taken everything away to be sold or re-purposed. It wasn't usual for highwaymen to strike a coach like that. Usually their marks were of the more wealthy variety. If the purpose had been to use the women, however, Richard supposed it made a bit more sense.

He mused that the highwaymen had been along the road and spied

Elizabeth through the window, and they had been taken away by madness and toppled the coach for the express purpose of having her.

The woman did seem to have an uncanny ability to drive men mad with wanting.

He had considered marrying her, all those years ago, even though it was impossible for him to do so. He couldn't explain exactly what it was about her, either. She was pretty, but not the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and she was not remarkable in a way that was easy to explain, but…

Well, she had a way about her. When she laughed, it was an expansive laugh, one that made a man feel as if he had been drawn into a particular society, one that was made up of only him and her, and it was quite a nice feeling. She could poke fun at a man, ridicule him to his face, and yet do it in such a way that it didn't seem mean-spirited, but rather a further intimacy, as if to say, *Yes, well, we are such close friends that you don't mind if I say such things, do you?*

He remembered the way Darcy had looked at her as she sat at the piano-forte in Lady Catherine's drawing room, her eyes flashing as she scolded him. *Nobody can ever be introduced in a ballroom,* she had said, smiling through her sarcasm. *Gentlemen were scarce.*

Darcy had been destroyed even then, Richard now knew. The way he'd looked at her, he had been a man lost at sea. She was insulting him, and he was fumbling to try to defend himself, but what he truly wished for was for her to insult him further. He was Elizabeth Bennet's body and soul.

That, of course, became more evident when she was presumed dead.

Richard had seen men lose wives of ten years who were not as badly affected as Darcy had been. He had never seen such grief, such pain. Darcy had become a shadow of himself. He had retreated into himself and begun drinking heavily—but alone, not in the company of others, and to the point where he was only caustic and cutting when approached, so the drink brought him no comfort. Then he had up and decided to marry Anne de Bourgh, which had pleased their aunt but had been quite out of character for Darcy himself.

Now, Darcy likely regretted it, though he couldn't very well marry Elizabeth if she had spent the last three years of her life trading her favors for money. He might make her his mistress. It would seem as if he would want nothing but to have her.

However, Darcy *was* proper.

Darcy liked to do things the "right" way, and he wasn't the kind of man who allowed the normal sort of excuses to enable himself to do "wrong" things. Fitzwilliam knew he took his marriage vows seriously. He remembered Darcy making comments about vows being worth

nothing if they were not honored. Darcy would not make a vow and then break it. He was not that sort of man.

So, what was going to become of Miss Bennet when they found her?

Richard couldn't venture to guess, but he was beginning to wonder if it wouldn't make Darcy more miserable than he already was. Perhaps he never should have told his cousin that she was alive.

It was guilt that had driven him to it.

He felt so wretched for having done what he did. He was ashamed of himself, and he felt soiled and base. He had gone to seek forgiveness to try to feel better, but it hadn't worked, because Darcy hadn't forgiven him and never would.

What I should have done, he thought, *was to simply find Elizabeth myself. I could have scraped up some money to give her, enough to get her out of her bad situation, and then I could have left it alone.*

He could still put this plan into action. He could go to the cottage of Miss Lucas on his own. He could tell Darcy that he didn't know where it was.

But that struck Richard as cruel. Perhaps forcing Darcy to find a woman he could never have but desperately loved was also cruel. Richard couldn't decide which was crueler.

So, he told him about the cottage.

They set out the very next morning.

Darcy didn't speak to him on the journey. He had brought a book, and he stared at the pages for the full hour that they traveled, but Richard noticed that he very rarely turned the pages. Darcy was simply avoiding conversation with him. Richard couldn't blame him.

I could have loved her, too, Richard thought at him. *If I'd had the means, I would have asked for her hand. What's more, she might have accepted me. She and I actually got along rather well. I never saw the two of you have a conversation that wasn't tinged with some kind of conflict.*

But it was best not to think about such things, because inevitably, it would only lead to Richard contemplating some kind of marital congress with Elizabeth, which must needs be superior to the travesty he had engaged with her in that inn. He shuddered even contemplating it, and he shoved any thoughts of her bare skin out of his mind, the way he always did when the thoughts surfaced.

He wished it had never happened.

He would do his best to pretend it hadn't.

Finally, they reached the cottage, and they disembarked.

A small boy had the door open and was coming across the drive to investigate their arrival. Richard thought the cottage was rather bigger than a cottage. It was a proper house. This was quite a thing to have bestowed upon a mistress. He gazed up at it, and Darcy stalked past him, leaving him behind.

A woman in a servant's uniform hurried out to scoop up the tiny boy, scolding him. She propped the child on her hip and inquired if they were lost.

"No, no," said Darcy. "We're here to see Miss Lucas."

"Was she expecting you?" said the woman. "It's only me here for the children and a maid of all work, you know. I would have thought if guests were arriving, I would have been informed. I might have been able to help with the preparations."

"We were not expected," said Richard. "Our apologies."

"Oh," said the woman. "Well, come in, then. I'll be sure to let the mistress know you're here."

They followed her inside. The house was clean and tidy, if a little sparsely furnished.

The woman asked for their names and went off into one of the other rooms.

They were left alone.

Richard tried to remember anything about Maria Lucas, and he couldn't. He knew she had dined with them at Rosings on the occasions that Elizabeth had, but he had no memory of her. Did she have light hair? Dark hair? Did she resemble her sister, Mrs. Collins?

Another servant appeared and escorted them to a sitting room. In a few minutes, she brought in a plate of biscuits and tea and told them that Miss Lucas would be along shortly.

When the woman did appear, Richard still didn't remember her. He shook his head at it, thinking that he could have seen her on the street and never recognized her. She had been so quiet and timid back then that she had melted into the periphery of the scenery and, indeed, his mind.

Darcy, however, said, "Ah, Miss Lucas, you look more lovely than I remembered. It has been far too long since we have seen you. I must apologize for not renewing our acquaintance sooner. The truth is that your reappearance was not shared with me. I had no notion you were still alive."

Miss Lucas seemed ill-equipped to deal with this lengthy pronouncement and stood stock still for several long seconds, her lips parted. Then, recovering, she said, "You are too kind, Mr. Darcy." She settled herself in an upholstered chair, sitting up so straight so as not to rest against the back of it, and regarded them both. "I must say it is quite a surprise to receive you both here."

"As I say," said Mr. Darcy, "I would have come sooner if I had known that you were here."

"Would you have?" Miss Lucas did not seem to believe this. She was amused, however, not offended. "And so, upon learning of my situation, you rushed out here immediately? That is the reason for

your visit?"

"Why, of course," said Mr. Darcy.

Her amusement seemed to have deepened. She turned to Richard, now, and he got the most horrible sensation that she was looking through his clothes. "You, Colonel Fitzwilliam, are quite silent."

Lord, thought Richard. *She knows. She and Elizabeth are in communication, and Elizabeth has told her of what passed between me and her.* He felt bile rise in his throat and wondered if he would need to excuse himself.

"And still silent, even in the face of that pronouncement." Miss Lucas let out a trill of laughter.

"Pardon me," said Richard. "I'm afraid that I'm not feeling quite as well as I was when we arrived."

"Oh, is that so?" She wasn't laughing anymore.

Richard loosened his cravat and sat forward. "I believe you know the exact reason for our visit, don't you, Miss Lucas?"

"I haven't the faintest of ideas," she said. "I thought Mr. Darcy was insisting we were only renewing our friendship."

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat. "Well, that is, I do have some questions for you about…" He could not seem to find the words. "About what befell you," he settled on. "All those years ago, when the carriage was set upon."

"I'd prefer not to speak of all that." Her voice was hard.

"No, I don't mean…" Darcy grimaced. "What I want to ask about is not the particulars of your sufferings, madam, but simply about, uh, well, about Elizabeth Bennet."

"I know nothing of her," said Miss Lucas, too quickly.

"That's not true," said Richard.

She turned to look at him. "It's quite sad, truly, but Miss Bennet is likely dead."

"She's not," said Darcy. "We know she's alive."

Miss Lucas held Richard's gaze. "Ah," she said softly. "So, you did recognize her, after all."

Mr. Darcy stiffened.

"She told you of it," said Richard. "I knew it. You know where she is."

Miss Lucas put her hand to her mouth, her eyes widening, as if she had just realized what she'd given away. "Oh, dash it all." She got up from her chair and snatched up a biscuit. She crossed the room to the window, pulling aside the curtain. She ate her biscuit, back to them both.

Darcy looked at Richard, his inner turmoil written upon his countenance.

Richard felt guilt squeezing his spine again. He hated to have

caused this affect in his cousin. He hated to have caused pain for anyone. He resolved to fix it, to say something.

But Darcy was on his feet before Richard worked out what to say. Darcy crossed the room and went to Miss Lucas. “Where is she?”

Miss Lucas turned to look at him. “She doesn’t want anyone to know where she is. She wants everyone to believe she is dead.”

“Well, I don’t care,” said Mr. Darcy.

“If you reveal her, you will do damage to her family’s good name, and she could not bear that,” said Miss Lucas.

“I will never do anything to harm her,” said Mr. Darcy. “But she is obviously in need of some sort of assistance, if she has no other means to support herself besides…” His voice cracked, and he didn’t continue.

Miss Lucas eyed him. “You care about her, then.”

“Can you doubt it?” Richard spoke up. “Did not everyone know how he reacted to the news of her death?”

Miss Lucas glanced at Richard. “Well, Elizabeth and I were rather occupied during that period of time, what with struggling to feed and clothe and shelter ourselves, so no, we weren’t kept apprised with the gossip of society.” There was an acerbic edge to her tone.

“Lord,” said Darcy. “If I had but known, I could have fixed all of this. Why didn’t she think to come to me?”

“You?” said Miss Lucas, eyebrows raised. “Because you were so grudgingly in love with her that you proposed to her against your better judgment?”

Mr. Darcy furrowed his brow. “Is that what she said?”

No one said anything.

Mr. Darcy hung his head. “I suppose she did refuse me, didn’t she? I suppose she hates me.”

“No, I don’t think ‘hate’ is the word I’d use,” said Miss Lucas.

Darcy squared his shoulders. “Well, I don’t care. Whether she hates me or not, I can’t leave her in this situation. You will tell me where she is so that I may assist her. She needs help. She is not set up in some country house like you are, I suppose, or she wouldn’t have traveled to Brussels.”

“You would do that?” said Miss Lucas. “You would help her and ask nothing in return?”

“What could she possibly give me in return?” said Darcy. Then understanding dawned on him, and his neck turned red. “No, no, Miss Lucas, I am a married man.” He hurried back across the room and sat down again.

Miss Lucas regarded them both. She also returned to the other side of the room and took her seat. “And you, Colonel?”

“This is not about that,” said Richard in a weary voice.

She considered them both. “Perhaps it’s not at that.”

“Miss Lucas, I don’t understand it,” said Mr. Darcy. “How did this come to be? We have heard your story, about how you ended up under the protection of the earl, but what became of Miss Bennet?”

She spread her hands. “We were both, um, ruined in the process of the coach being overturned. There was talk of killing us both, but our lives were spared. The men who had done it seemed to have some sentimentality about the thing. They argued about how dreadful it was to kill a woman after tupping her, and then never did manage to kill us. They brought us along with them to London, and one night we escaped them when they had gotten very drunk and fallen asleep.”

“These men, did you ever discover their names?” said Mr. Darcy in a voice something like a growl.

“Why?” said Miss Lucas.

“To kill them, of course,” Richard said briskly.

“Yes,” agreed Darcy.

“Oh, as to that, they are already dead,” said Miss Lucas. “We can lay that at the feet of Mr. Wickham.”

“Mr. Wickham?” said Darcy, in shock and horror.

“Yes, it was all quite lucky that he found us, I suppose,” said Miss Lucas. “I do not know why he was in London at all. Elizabeth and I spent nearly a week hiding from the men, begging for food, sleeping outside. That was truly the worst of it, I think.”

“Why didn’t you go home?” said Richard.

“We couldn’t,” said Miss Lucas. “Not after… Oh, I don’t know. I can’t say what either of us were thinking at the time. But then the men from before found us, and they were in the midst of dragging us back to do whatever it was they wished to do with us, but there was Mr. Wickham, and he rescued us.”

Darcy scoffed.

“Preposterous,” said Richard. “What would he have been doing there? He was supposed to be with the regiment in Hertfordshire. Did you ask him why he was there?”

“I don’t think we had the presence of mind to do so, no,” said Miss Lucas. “He was very helpful. He took us to a place where we were welcomed by some very nice women, who also happened to be harlots, and they helped us to establish ourselves.”

“Establish yourselves in harlotry,” said Mr. Darcy, shaking his head.

“Well, there were very few options for us,” said Miss Lucas. “And perhaps you will think this is shocking, but it was not such a bad thing. I met the earl soon into it all, it’s true, but I found it rather exciting, the dresses and the men and the feeling, you know, of being desired? There were bad parts, but it was not *all* bad. I’m afraid Elizabeth was rather less enamored with it, of course. But that is not

really my story to tell. If she wishes to explain more of it to you, I shall leave it to her."

"Leave it to her?" said Mr. Darcy. "So, you'll tell us where she is?"

"Yes, I shall," said Miss Lucas. "But you must understand that she has a plan, and you must do nothing that will interfere with it. I think, however, you will be pleased to assist her with it, which will be only for her good."

"What sort of a plan?" said Mr. Darcy.

"Perhaps it is better if she explains it," said Miss Lucas. "I find myself confused about some of the particulars. At any rate, you must tell no one that you know she is alive." Her eyes widened. "Good heavens, you have not said anything already, have you?"

"No," said Mr. Darcy. "To no one."

"Good," said Miss Lucas. "I know her sister Jane is married to your friend Mr. Bingley—"

"Bingley and I don't see each other nearly as often now that we are both married," said Mr. Darcy. "Anyway, I would never convey information that would only bring pain to her family."

"I am still confused about this idea of a plan," said Richard. "A plan to accomplish what exactly?"

"Oh, to get herself free entirely of needing to employ herself and to tell her family of her survival without causing any damage to their reputation," said Miss Lucas.

"Such a thing isn't possible," said Richard. "Is it?"

"I don't know," said Miss Lucas. "Perhaps, but it will hinge on whether anyone will believe her fabricated history she has concocted."

"And that would be what?" said Richard.

"Well, you see, there was a soldier once that she took into her bed —"

"Just tell us where she is," Darcy interrupted. "All that's important is that we find her."

"Of course," said Miss Lucas.

* * *

Darcy insisted that they go there directly, upon leaving Miss Lucas, and he got no resistance from Richard, who no longer seemed capable of looking him in the eye. Darcy thought Richard ought to be ashamed of himself. Darcy had very little patience for people who had no self-control. Richard was in possession of some control, but he had a great less than Darcy possessed himself.

Darcy didn't know if it was realistic to assume the entire profession of women selling themselves to men could be obliterated from existence, but he thought it should be. He didn't understand men who couldn't keep themselves in check. He himself had never, not once, even considered paying a woman for such things.

But he supposed even his own self-control had its limits. There was no possibility of his having left bastard children across the country, it was true, but that did not mean he had not engaged in other activities with women before his marriage.

Of course, then, Elizabeth had died, and something inside himself had died, too, and he hadn't had any kind of appetite for such things since.

No, perhaps he shouldn't blame Richard for what had happened. Even so, he did. He hated him. He would never be able to look at his cousin the same way now that this had occurred.

But he did not wish to think of that, so he tried to distract himself as they traveled.

Unfortunately, his thoughts were only a thorny thicket that pricked him at every turn.

He could not think about going to meet Elizabeth, about seeing her again after all this time, about how badly he wished to see her. He couldn't, because then he was forced to think of what she had been through, and he felt physically ill at the thought of her with other men. Even if she hadn't had much of a choice. Even if he didn't blame her for it. Even if he sympathized. However, it was still appalling.

He couldn't think of other aspects of his life, because that only brought up poor Anne, who was pacing the floors in the town house and begging for a bit of his time, begging to know what this business was that he was conducting. He was lying to her, and this was a betrayal. He knew that he couldn't convince himself of anything otherwise.

Still, he *had* to find Elizabeth.

Perhaps he should send for Georgiana. She had gone to visit a school friend in her estate in the country for the summer, but he could write to her and ask her to come back and keep company with Anne. Of course, if he did that, he would have both of them prying into his business.

Georgiana had never even met Elizabeth, so she had no understanding of all of it. Indeed, she seemed to resent the very idea of her, since her death had altered her brother so deeply. Her coming out into society had been delayed by a year because Darcy couldn't be bothered to think about it or authorize it. Georgiana still blamed him for that.

I am not married yet, because I was too old when I came out, she would tell him.

He knew this was preposterous. Seventeen was not even approaching "too old," but she was in the insufferable stage of young womanhood in which she was convinced that she knew everything and that she was always right.

Maybe he didn't want to bring Georgiana back because he didn't want to face her continued ire. However, he should give some thought to the continued welfare of his wife, and she needed a companion. Perhaps she'd needed a companion back at Pemberley as well, but he hadn't noticed.

Pemberley was much larger than his town house. He never saw Anne in Pemberley, except for at meals. He wasn't in love with his wife, but he had affection for her, and he was responsible for her. He should make more of an effort. There were a few bits of social events in town, even in the summer. He should take her somewhere, to the opera, or to Vauxhall, or even to the park for a promenade.

Once he had rescued and settled Elizabeth Bennet, this whole chapter of his life would be concluded, after all.

Except that thought rent his heart in two, destroying the very core of his being.

He had barely survived Elizabeth's death. Now, being told she was alive but knowing that he couldn't have her, it was more than he thought he could bear.

She hates me, he assured himself.

Yes, he could still remember the way she had denied his marriage proposal. The heated way she'd told him he was the last man in the world she could be prevailed on to marry. The way she had looked at him then, it had held such contempt.

Well, her hatred of him had not dimmed his love for her. Her death hadn't done it. The knowledge that she'd spread her thighs for Richard hadn't done it. *Nothing* would do it. He would be tormented by it forever, but he would stay away from her once he had made sure she was safe and settled.

He could not wait to see her.

He needed to see her.

Even so, when they arrived at her house, it seemed far too soon. The house was in a part of town that he and Richard had already searched, but they hadn't gone door-to-door or anything, and they had found no sign of her. He thought that if they hadn't gone to Miss Lucas, they would have never found her, and his stomach lurched.

The house was small, barely a house, truly. It was a squat sort of hovel tucked onto the dirty street. He gazed at it, unable to move, his heart in his throat.

"Darcy?" Richard finally said, who was out of the carriage and peering in at him.

"Yes," said Darcy. "I'm coming." He forced himself to move. In moments, he was standing on the street next to Richard.

They told the carriage to wait, and then they went to the door.

Richard looked at him. "Will you knock, then?"

“Yes,” said Darcy, and he realized his voice sounded strangled. He lifted his hand. He had a horrible thought. What if she was… entertaining within? He heaved, shutting his eyes.

“Shall I knock?” said Richard.

Darcy didn’t say anything. Instead, he rapped on the door, three loud bangs in quick succession.

Then, they waited.

Nothing happened.

She *was* with a man. She was occupied and—

“Perhaps she isn’t at home,” said Richard. “We could come back, perhaps tomorrow.”

Darcy licked his lips. He didn’t know if he could stomach that. Knowing she was here and then trying to eat dinner and then to sleep? No, he would simply stay here and wait. He would not, he *could not*, leave.

The door opened.

She was wearing a blue morning dress. It was noticeably patched in a few places. Her hair was carelessly tied at her neck, her dark hair falling over one shoulder—a tumbling wave of dark tresses. She was beautiful. She was more beautiful than he remembered. He had some picture of her in his head as being enchanting when she laughed, though pretty otherwise, but she had either changed in these three years or he had changed. He did not know which. Now, she was overwhelmingly lovely, and tears sprang unbidden to Darcy’s eyes.

She uttered a cry of surprise.

“Miss Bennet,” said Richard. “I need to convey to you my deepest apologies. I don’t know how it was I did not recognize you, but please believe that I would never—”

She shut the door in their faces.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elizabeth clutched her chest, her breath coming in strangled gasps. How could he be here? How could they *both* be here?

Lord, the sight of Colonel Fitzwilliam clothed only brought the thought of his naked skin into focus within her mind's eye, and it made her feel that same despicable feeling of having been robbed of the last piece of her innocence.

The feeling made her feel empty, like a hollow woman.

And lonely. Dear God, so *lonely*.

She wrenched the door open.

They were still there.

"Come in," she said, stepping away. "Please, come in." Her voice was wrong—far too high pitched, a squeaky mouse-like sound. She was trembling all over.

The colonel stepped inside without looking at her, but Mr. Darcy was gaping at her with a lost expression on his face. She'd never seen him appear so, not even in that moment when she'd refused his proposal.

She remembered there had been one moment, one tiny moment, when he'd been bewildered and hurt, and then all that had been overtaken by anger and officiousness, which was his way. Oh, but then he'd sent her that letter, and she thought back over every exchange she'd ever had with him and re-examined it all, and she hadn't been sure of anything, and she'd almost regretted her denial.

Later, in the wake of the calamity her life had become, of *course* she regretted it. How different everything could have been if she'd only said yes. But she couldn't have known what would become of her, not then.

They were inside.

She shut the door behind them.

Mr. Darcy was still looking at her. Lord, why were his eyes so shiny? He wasn't weeping, was he? If he wept, she would weep. Why was he reacting thus?

She smoothed out her skirts, out of sorts, emotions warring within her. "I haven't anything to offer you in the way of refreshment, I'm afraid. I was not expecting anyone and there is nothing in the house

but what meager provisions I purchased this morning at the market for my own sustenance. I might, with some time, manage to put some flour and sugar together and bake it into—"

"We don't need anything," said Mr. Darcy. "Please, we are not here to take things from you. We… I…" He suddenly reached out and took her hand.

She gasped. She wasn't wearing gloves, and Mr. Darcy wasn't either, likely because it was a warm summer day, and his skin was warm and his grip was firm.

"My apologies," he whispered. His voice wasn't strong. "Forgive me, but if I did not touch you, I'm not sure I would believe that you were real."

She peered up at him, looking into his eyes. They were wide and brown and welcoming. No one had looked at her with that sort of affection in years. She *was* going to weep. No, no, she couldn't. She snatched her hand out of his. "Let's go into the sitting room, at least. We mustn't talk here in the doorway." She fairly ran from them, leading the way.

Her house was quite small, only four rooms. She had two bedrooms, one that she slept in and one that she entertained in. She couldn't stand sleeping in that same bed. She liked to be able to shut a door on that room. It was easier to pretend that part of herself didn't exist that way. The other two rooms were a small sitting room and a kitchen. Now, because it was warm, the windows were open and the curtains fluttered in the breeze.

She sat down in a chair next to the empty fireplace, and Darcy and the colonel settled themselves on a sofa opposite her.

It was quiet.

She twisted her hands together in her lap.

"I didn't finish my apology," said the colonel in a low, dull voice. "I truly am sorry. I hate that such a thing occurred between us, madam."

She laughed. She didn't mean to, but it all struck her as funny. Maybe the only way to keep from weeping was to laugh. "Wasn't it to your liking, then, Colonel?" Oh, she sounded bitter. "Didn't you feel as though you got what you paid for?"

The colonel flinched, bowing his head.

Mr. Darcy shifted position on the sofa, moving away from the colonel.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying.

"You mustn't apologize," said the colonel, lifting his gaze to hers. "You are not to blame for any of this, and that is the tragedy of it all, that you were made to think that because you had been trespassed against by villainous men that you should bear the consequences of *their* crimes."

Elizabeth swallowed.

"Just so," said Mr. Darcy. "You are—"

"Of *my* crimes," the colonel interrupted. "*I* have trespassed against you."

Her lips parted. "No, it wasn't that way. You mustn't concern yourself with—"

"Your situation robs you of the ability to consent," said the colonel. "If you cannot survive else then you are—"

"I can survive without taking men into my bed," she said. "I have a bit of money. It was left to me by my husband—"

"Husband," said Darcy, eyes wide.

"Oh, well, I barely knew him," said Elizabeth. "He died abroad. He was an officer in the army. His name was Lieutenant Thistlehill. His father had purchased a commission for him. He was the natural son of a duke, I believe. We were only really together for a night, and then he wished to marry me, and I consented, and then he left me with enough to, um, to remain faithful while he was gone. At any rate, he died and there was some inheritance settled upon me. I have not needed to, er, entertain any men in years now, in truth. It was a choice on my part, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and I was not damaged by the encounter. I am quite fine." She smoothed out her skirts and squared her shoulders. Saying so many words seemed to have given her some semblance of calm, and she was glad of it.

"I am quite confused," said Darcy. "How did you meet this man?"

"Well, he was, er, a patron," she said. "But he had…" How was one to delicately say that he had been unable to remove himself before spilling his seed in her womb and felt badly about it? "Well, he became concerned that he had gotten me with child. As his own parents were not married, he was quite intent on never visiting such a future upon his own issue, so he was insistent that we marry."

"But he's dead," said Darcy.

"Yes," she said. "I am known in these parts as Mrs. Thistlehill, though, as I am his widow legally."

"Perhaps that explains why we had such difficulty finding you," said Mr. Darcy. "We did not know what name you used."

"And you were not with child?" said the colonel.

"No," she said. "Nor am I presently." Because she knew that was likely why he had brought that up.

Darcy turned sharply to the colonel, who only bowed his head again. They'd obviously not spoken of that, had they? She wanted to laugh again, at the absurdity of all of this, but she managed to stop herself.

"I confess I don't understand," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "If you do not need to engage in such activity, is that why you were so reticent

when I approached you in that inn? Because your manner of dress, it indicated that—"

"No," she said. "I was indeed soliciting favors there, or at least that was my intent. My reticence, as you call it, was simply because you are… you."

The colonel swallowed.

"Not because there is anything wrong with you," she hastened to add. "Only because I… having known you… well, it was obviously a bad idea. It was foolish to think you wouldn't recognize me. And now, here you both are. It was all very ill-advised on my part."

"I should think it is a good thing we have found you," said Mr. Darcy. "Whatever troubles you have, they are over. I shall do whatever I can to assist you. You will no longer stay in this house. You will accompany us—"

"*What?*" She drew herself up, finding whatever shreds of dignity she still possessed and tugging them tightly about herself. "You have not changed, I see, Mr. Darcy. You still feel that you are entitled to order everyone about and that others will simply fall in line with your pronouncements. I am not leaving this house."

Darcy gaped at her. "You most certainly are, and how could you possibly have the temerity to deny me?"

"I see you're still not used to that, are you? To people denying you?" She lifted her chin.

His upper lip curled. "And I see that you still dislike me, but that is of no matter to me, madam. You are in trouble, and you will accept help, because I shall not leave you to this… this squalor."

"You come to my home and call it *squalor*?" Her voice was rising. "One wonders, Mr. Darcy, with all your means and education, that you were never taught manners."

Darcy snorted. "Oh, excuse me. I'm so very sorry. The day that they taught the proper way to speak to a fallen woman in desperate need of rescue must have been one when I was too ill to attend lessons."

"And you call me a fallen woman?"

"We are discussing the fact that you allowed my cousin to pay you to tup you, so yes, it is what you *are*, and you haven't denied it." Darcy's face was red.

She was trembling again, but this time from anger. "*Out* of my house. Now."

The colonel got up.

"Never," said Darcy, nostrils flaring. He remained seated.

The colonel blinked at them both and then sat back down.

"I don't, as it happens," said Elizabeth, "need your help, because I have a plan of my own."

"Oh, yes, Miss Lucas mentioned that," said Mr. Darcy. "Perhaps

you'd like to explain it, because she seemed unable to do so."

"Miss Lucas?" said Elizabeth, horrified. "Maria told you of where I was? That two-faced hussy. I shall wring her neck the next time I see her."

"She said something else," said Mr. Darcy in a hard voice. "She spoke of Mr. Wickham—"

"Oh, I have nothing to say about that man!" Elizabeth burst out with. "He has been gone from my life for years now. I don't have *anything* to do with him."

"But she said that he was in London—"

"I don't wish to speak of—to *think* of Mr. Wickham," she said in an icy voice.

It was quiet.

The silence stretched on for long moments.

Mr. Darcy finally broke it. "I'm waiting to hear this plan of yours. I'm waiting to hear why it is you don't need my help. It is not actually evident from your surroundings." He gestured about.

She shook her head. "You, Mr. Darcy, are the most insufferable man that I have ever met."

"Yes, and you are still so very ruled by your pride, Miss Bennet—or Mrs. Thistlehill, whatever you wish to call yourself—that you will spit upon the very lifeline you need whilst you are drowning."

"I am not drowning." She huffed.

"Tell us about your plan." Mr. Darcy crossed his arms over his chest, settling into the sofa.

She glowered at him. He truly *was* insufferable. "I only need money. I have worked the sums, and I think if I could save a certain amount, then I could move into a house in a different part of town, one that would actually befit the widow of an officer. Then, I could contact my family, and they would never need to know of my sordid past. No one would, in fact."

"How would you explain your absence for all these years?" said Mr. Darcy.

"I would say that I had lost my memory before meeting Mr. Thistlehill and that only recently, it all came back to me at once."

Mr. Darcy raised both his eyebrows.

"It is not so outlandish," spoke up the colonel. "I have actually heard of such things occurring. Why, the missing Viscount of Pembroke, you remember his story?"

Darcy stroked his chin. "Yes, perhaps. If you had been injured when the coach had been set upon by highwaymen, that would lend credence to it."

"Just so," said Elizabeth. "In my story, I would claim that I woke in a shallow grave with a lump on the back of my head and no notion of

who I was or where I came from. Others would assume the highwaymen had left me for dead, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," said Darcy again.

"And then I shall say that I met my late husband rather quickly and that he protected me," she said. "So, there will be no need of anyone knowing of anything else."

"Yes, it could work," said Darcy. "It could erase all of this."

She felt triumphant. She nodded curtly.

"I don't see the need for more money and the other house, however," said Darcy in a sour voice. "Your family would support you if you went to them now."

"Yes," she said. "But I don't wish to burden them. And besides, if they did not believe me, it would put them in an awkward position."

"But it is all true enough, and you are living here—"

"Because I am saving money," she said. "I must sacrifice a bit until I have enough."

"How much more do you need?" said Mr. Darcy.

She didn't say anything.

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Mr. Darcy. "I'm sure there is no barrier to my procuring the sum for you. Very well, if you wish to do it that way, I shall allow it. I will write you a promissory note which you can take to—"

"I won't take your money, Mr. Darcy," she said hotly.

"You most certainly will," he said.

"No, I won't," she said. "I cannot be indebted to you, not in any way. I could not bear that. It would be insupportable."

"You have no other means of securing money," he said.

"I obviously do," she said.

"Oh," said Mr. Darcy. "I see. Yes, it's all quite clear to me now. You would rather debase yourself than be in my debt. That's very rational, Miss Bennet."

She wanted to weep again, but for very different reasons. She could not abide this man.

"Very well then," Mr. Darcy said in a low voice. "If you want to sell your time, then you'll sell it to me."

Her mouth fell open and she gaped at him in shock. "No."

The colonel turned to his cousin. "Surely, Darcy this is not the way to have her. I would have thought you—"

"I shall never allow you into my bed," said Elizabeth. Her voice shook.

"I didn't say anything about your bed," said Mr. Darcy. "I said your time."

Her lips parted.

"I am a married man, Miss Bennet," said Mr. Darcy, and his voice

cracked.

"You are?" She had not heard this. It made something inside her shatter in a way she hadn't thought it would. She had not expected to feel such a surge of emotion. She forced herself to laugh again. "Tell me you did not wed Caroline Bingley, at least."

"Of course not," said Mr. Darcy.

"Miss de Bourgh, then?"

"She is Mrs. Darcy now," he said.

"Of course," she whispered.

"I thought you were dead," he said. He was pleading for her to understand this.

"I know you did," she said.

"I wanted to die, too," he said.

"No, don't say such things." For some reason, she was whispering.

"You hate me, though," said Mr. Darcy. "Clearly, you despise me, so, I don't see why it would matter to you."

"No," she said. "It doesn't matter at all. When are you coming to see me, to buy my time?"

"When are you free?" he said.

"Tonight?"

He nodded. "I'll see you then."

"Good," she said, and it was fierce. "Very good, then."

* * *

"Good God, Darcy, what are you thinking?" Richard was in the carriage, and Darcy was sitting across from him, doing some kind of violence to his cravat as if he couldn't breathe else.

"When you were with her, what was it like?" Darcy's voice was even and strange.

"What?"

The carriage lurched forward, taking them down the street, taking them back to the respectable parts of town.

"Did she take off all her clothes?"

"Don't," said Richard.

"Did you see her breasts?"

"Please, I beg you."

"Did you kiss them? Did she make noise when you had your hands on her? Did she enjoy your touch?"

"*Stop it.*" Richard wasn't sure if it was a yell or a sob.

They were quiet.

Time passed. The scenery outside began to change. The houses on the streets grew less shabby.

"I need to know," said Darcy softly.

"You don't."

"I do, though," said Darcy. "It plagues me, wondering about it. I

need to know so that I can stop the endless sea of questions I have about the event."

Richard didn't respond to this.

"Please," said Darcy. "*Please*."

"I don't know what you want me to say," said Richard. "It was not… of course she acted as if she was pleased. I was paying her. That is the way things are in such situations. I can't even begin to imagine what it was really like for her, and I don't wish to. I only wish it had never happened. In fact, I think I shall never pay a woman again. I… I don't know. Somehow, I had never truly contemplated it all, I don't think, and now it only seems a bit of base villainy. It seems wretched, and I am horrified I ever participated in such an institution."

"Quite so," said Darcy. "Have I not been *saying* this—"

"Yes, yes, you and your superiority. Of course, you are better than us all."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Of course, you have just purchased her for yourself, so perhaps you aren't any better in the end."

"I'm not going to… to do anything to her. Heavens, I won't touch her."

"I don't know what's worse, Darcy," said Richard. "That you're lying to yourself or that you seem to believe your own lies."

CHAPTER SIX

Darcy was perturbed. He could not eat. He picked at his chicken and used his fork to push potatoes from one side of his plate to the other.

"I thought you liked them with parsley," said his wife.

"Liked what?" he said. He thought it would mean something to have found Elizabeth, that something within him would feel settled, but it was not that way at all. Everything was worse now. Finding her, staring into her eyes, seizing her hand, it had made it all tangible in an awful way. Now, she was truly there, and everything he had known about her situation was real in a way that it had not been before. Now, he was aware of the fact that Richard had been with her, that, oh, God knew how many men—

"Potatoes," said Anne.

He looked up at her. The dining room was empty. He had dismissed the footmen because he felt it was foolish to have such formality as someone serving his portions when it was only the two of them. It was too hot for footmen, anyway. The dining room was in the interior of the house, and it had no windows. Coupled with the hot food and the restrictions of being dressed for dinner, everything was stifling and horrid.

"Will you tell me about your business, Mr. Darcy?" said Anne.

"I could try, Mrs. Darcy, but I guarantee your eyes would glaze over from boredom within two minutes flat," he said, making a valiant effort to actually spear a potato. He couldn't seem to find it within him, however. If he speared it, he would have to bring it to his mouth. Then he would have to chew. He set down his fork. "It's too hot for potatoes."

"I wasn't aware such a thing was possible." She was amused.

He eased his forefinger under his collar. "It's all very well for you. Evening gowns have short sleeves. I, however, am head-to-toe in three layers, and I am melting."

"You do look uncomfortable." She smiled. "Well, Mr. Darcy, strip down to shirt sleeves, then. You have dismissed the footmen, and it is only me here, and I shall not mind."

He swallowed.

"You know," said Anne, "perhaps what you need is a break from thinking of your business. Perhaps you need to do something diverting or… or pleasant." Her voice had dropped a little in tone.

He picked up his fork again and attacked a potato. How was that fair? His wife was woefully inexperienced, as he was well aware. How was it that she had managed to master sounding seductive so easily? "Yes, I was thinking we might venture out of the house at some point."

She laughed. "I thought we could stay here."

"Mrs. Darcy." He shot her a look.

She flinched. "Apologies." She blushed. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to be…" She looked about the empty room. "No one can hear, though," she whispered. "And you have not… it has been quite some time since you… visited me."

"Not at dinner, for God's sake," he muttered.

She went back to her plate.

He put the potato in his mouth and chewed.

She didn't eat anything else, though. "I've displeased you somehow," she said to her chicken.

He swallowed the potato and then he needed a drink to wash it down. "Of course not. Please don't say such things."

"Well, if there is something that you wish I would do that I am not doing or something I *am* doing that you wish I wouldn't—"

"For heaven's sake, there is nothing wrong with you." It came out sharper than he meant it to.

She flinched again.

He reached over and put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry." A pause. "Attend to me, my darling. It is true that you are stronger since your mother's death, not nearly as weak and sickly as you once were."

She looked up at him. "It's very odd, isn't it? It's as if she was sucking all the life out of me, as if she took up all the air in the room and there was none left for me to breathe. I don't understand it."

"But if you were with child, it might all… well, oughtn't we wait? I do not wish to put you in undue danger yet."

She pulled her hand away from his. "You think I am fragile."

He sighed.

"You're not going to break me, husband."

"So you say, but if I did, I don't think I could bear that." He gave her a small smile. "Your mother would likely haunt me from the grave, don't you think?"

She didn't smile back.

He sighed. "I'm going out after dinner."

"Going out?" She was surprised and not the least bit pleased. "Where?"

"To a gentleman's club of which I am a member," he said.

"Oh," she said. "So, I suppose women aren't allowed. You're going somewhere without me, as you always do."

"I'm sorry," he said. He truly was. Lying to her was disgusting, but he couldn't explain it to her. He couldn't tell her that he was going to visit Elizabeth Bennet, that he was *paying* Elizabeth. "I have been thinking that perhaps I shall write to Georgiana. Perhaps she can come here and keep you company."

"Don't order her to do it, please," said Anne. "If she wishes to come and see me, that is one thing, but if she is having a pleasant time with her friend, I don't wish to displace her."

"I know you are lonely and bored, Mrs. Darcy, but I did *warn* you before we left—"

"Yes, I suppose it is all my own fault that I want my husband to pay me some attention," she said, and he wasn't sure he'd ever heard such strength in her tone.

"Mrs. Darcy…" He hesitated. "Anne." He waited for her to meet his gaze. "I thought you understood this when I proposed to you. I thought you were well aware that this match between us would be borne of respect and duty and affection but that it would not be a love match. You said that you did not feel such things for me either."

She nodded. "Of course. I don't know what I am thinking. Please accept my apologies, sir. Perhaps it is far too hot, as you say. Perhaps the heat is adversely affecting my mood." But her voice was a little bit strangled.

It pierced him deep inside somewhere, and he realized something awful, something he should have realized when he was proposing to her. Now that he thought back on the way she had reacted to him, he should have seen how she felt. It had been all over her. But he had been dull then, made of stone and consumed by his grief. He had not been able to see anything clearly.

His wife was in love with him.

Maybe she couldn't help it, having been sheltered the way she had been, having been told from a young age by her mother that she was meant for him. Maybe it had been natural for her to develop those feelings.

"I am so very sorry," he said, tossing his napkin on the table.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"For everything," he muttered, scooting his chair back.

"Are you leaving now?" she said. "For your club?"

"Yes," he mumbled. He turned on his heel and walked out of the room, guilt following along behind him, dogging his footsteps.

* * *

Elizabeth did not know what to do with herself for the rest of the

day, so she began baking.

She could not bake bread, for it would take too long to rise. Besides, she had some bread left, and it did not make sense to start more when there was a loaf to be eaten. Instead, she made three sponge cakes and a batch of biscuits which she topped with coarse sugar.

Afterwards, she despaired, for she certainly could not eat all of this before it grew stale or perhaps grew mold—as it might indeed do in the heat and humidity. Even Mr. Darcy would not be able to consume it all—

Oh, Mr. Darcy!

He was coming to see her, and she was horrified and exulted.

She didn't know how she felt about Mr. Darcy. It was one thing to have regretted his proposal because she was ruined and pitiful. It was another thing entirely for him to have come back to her and gazed at her the way that he had gazed at her and then spoken to her the way he had. He was awful. She had forgotten how *awful* he was.

No, she had erased every bit of him from her memory except the pleasings parts. His dark eyes and his sturdy shoulders and the fact that he had good reason to hate Mr. Wickham and the fact that he had said that he most ardently loved her.

Then the reality of him, it made her furious.

But she wanted him to come back. She wanted to see him again. She could not wait until he was close to her again.

Maddeningly, she kept thinking about the way it had felt when he had touched her hand. His fingers were very thick and very strong, and her own small hand had been engulfed in his. Every time she thought of this, it went through her, a thrill of tingles. She had to shut her eyes and hold onto something for balance until the sensation had passed.

This, of course, was why she would never let him into her bed.

She wasn't like Maria was about it all, and she didn't know why. By all rights, it should have been the opposite between them. She thought that the man who had taken Maria's virtue had been quite rough with her. She remembered the bruise blossoming on Maria's chin, the way her lip was split and swollen.

The man who had pushed Elizabeth into the tree in the forest had been quick and rather gentle. He had made her face away from him and told her to close her eyes and think of something nice, to pretend it wasn't happening.

Then he'd lifted her skirts and pressed into her from behind, and she'd thought it would hurt or that there would be blood, but it didn't and there wasn't. It was invasive and strange and embarrassing, but that was all.

Afterwards, he wouldn't stop talking about a sister he had who had hair like hers and that had been worse. He was apologetic. He kept saying he was sorry and that he couldn't be held responsible, because he was gripped by madness, and it was awful because she got a strange idea that he might have desires for his sister which weren't strictly natural.

Even so, comparatively, what had befallen her wasn't bad. She hadn't been damaged, at least that was what she told herself. She was fine. She was completely fine.

And then, of course, when Mr. Wickham…

Well, anyway, it was odd, because it seemed as if Maria was healed as soon as her bruises were healed, but Elizabeth felt bruised somewhere else, somewhere unseen, somewhere intangible.

Everything about the business seemed ugly to her, possibly because she could see how the act was meant to be tender between men and women, and because she could see how easily it could create a bond. And yet, she had to engage in it and be sure to never allow that to happen to herself.

Which was why… if Mr. Darcy ever touched her like that, she would go to pieces. It would be the end of her.

She anxiously awaited his arrival, unsure of what to make of her conflicting emotions. She didn't want him to come back and to berate her the way he had. She could just hear his caustic tone and his high-handed way of ordering her about. She couldn't abide that. By all rights, she shouldn't want to see him at all.

But, oh, she did.

She wanted to be close to him, and she wanted him to look at her again the way he had looked at her before. She didn't know why that would be, not truly, when every aspect of the man was infuriating, but there it was.

Was that what love was?

She had fancied herself in love with Mr. Darcy numerous times over the past three years, but she had always dismissed the thought as some sort of fantasy she was spinning to comfort herself, because she knew she would never know real love, so having Mr. Darcy in her mind as a substitute was *something*, anyway.

On the other hand, she wasn't certain the fantasy was actually comforting. Perhaps it only tormented her. Her greatest regret was having spurned his proposal. More often than not, when she looked back at her life, that moment seemed to be the most crucial moment of her life, when she had made a choice that had doomed her.

When Mr. Darcy arrived that evening, she wasn't ready for him.

Oh, the house was ready and the cakes were out on a table in the sitting room and there were plates and forks and a tea service, and she

had changed into one of her evening dresses. She had three or four of them, all in various bright colors like would never be worn by a respectable lady. They were dresses designed to make her stand out, to draw the eye of men. She didn't want to wear one of them for him, but if she didn't, she only her drab morning dresses, and it seemed dreadfully improper to greet an evening guest in a morning dress.

Of course, it wasn't proper to have someone over to visit like this in the evening at all. If she were a respectable lady, she would not entertain a man alone. She would not have him over and feed him cakes in the hours after dinner. However, there was nothing for it. Besides, he knew what she was.

She wore a red dress. It was cut low on her chest and the fabric was flimsy around her legs, but other than the color, it was no worse than what any woman might wear to a ball. The night air was warm, anyway.

When she met him at the door, his gaze swept her and something ignited in his expression, something she'd seen in men's eyes before. She wasn't sure how she felt about seeing it in his.

Disappointed?

Pleased?

Excited?

He extinguished it almost immediately, drawing an expressionless mask down over his features. He was stiff as he greeted her. "I hope you are in good health, madam."

"You were just here this afternoon," she said. "I hardly think my health has changed in that time."

"I suppose not," he said.

"My apologies," she said. "That was frightfully rude of me. You seem to bring out the worst in me, sir."

"I hardly think you can lay that at my feet," he said dryly.

She glared at him but forced herself to take a deep, calming breath. "I am feeling quite well, sir. And you? Are you in good health?"

"Indeed," he said.

"Shall we go into the sitting room?"

He nodded.

They sat down, him on the sofa he had occupied earlier, and her in the chair opposite him. He eyed the table she'd set up, which was now sagging under the weight of cakes and biscuits.

"Would you like some cake?" she said.

"I suppose," he said.

She served him some.

He took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed. Raised his eyebrows. "That's quite good."

"You think so?" She tilted her head to one side, pleased. "I made it

myself."

"Truly?" He was surprised. "You… bake things? That's remarkable."

"I suppose it's too common a thing to have learned to make me truly accomplished," she said. "But I have learned all sorts of skills that I oughtn't have learned otherwise."

He choked on his next bite of cake.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't mean… not those sort of skills."

He swallowed, coughing a little.

"Let me get you some tea," she said, getting up to go back to the table. "Truly, there's not much skill in being a whore, anyway. There's very little to actually do. Well, perhaps there is. But the skill is all in the seduction, in the entrapment, if you will, not in what comes afterward, which is…" Why was she talking about this? Silently, she poured the tea and added cream and sugar. Even after all these years, she remembered how he took it. How many times had he come to the parsonage in Kent, sitting silently and looking uncomfortable while she spoke to Colonel Fitzwilliam or laughed at something Charlotte said?

At the time, she hadn't been able to understand it. Why had he visited so often, when he seemed in *pain* after his arrival? Why had he joined her on those walks on the grounds of Rosings when she'd warned him off, telling him that she would likely be there around that time every day precisely so he could avoid her?

Then he'd proposed, and it had all been clear.

She tried to think of something to say. "Do you want more cake? You seem to have finished that quickly."

"Oh, please." He offered her his plate. "I didn't seem to have a stomach for dinner, I'm afraid. I'm rather famished."

So, they ate cake.

He ate four pieces, and she ate one, and that took care of at least one of the cakes. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with the others. They sipped tea, and they sat together, and they were quiet. It was just like those times in the parsonage. He was just as silent, and he looked just as pained.

It might have been funny if she wasn't in such a turmoil.

Eventually, their teacups were drained and their plates were empty, and they were sitting in the soft light of lamps, and she didn't know what to say or do.

"I'm glad you came," she finally said. It was true. "I don't meant to be so angry when it comes to you, sir. I truly don't."

"I try to do things the right way, Miss Bennet." His voice was deep and rich. "But when it comes to you, I can't seem to determine what the right way is. I don't mean to anger you either."

"I know you don't."

“I only want to help you.”

“I know that.”

“I don’t think you realize what I went through when I thought you were dead.”

She fiddled with the skirt of her dress, not meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry about the ruse, but—”

“I don’t say it to blame you or to make you feel guilty,” he said. “Lord knows it was my own fault. You never did anything to give me any indication that you returned any of my feelings, and I know that now. Perhaps I liked to delude myself into thinking that you did, but I was foolish. You have always despised me, and it was frankly pathetic that I went to pieces when you died.”

“I don’t despise you,” she said.

“You don’t have to lie to me simply because I’m paying for your time.”

“I’m not lying,” she said. “We never even discussed amounts for that anyway. Or… or perimeters. You said you don’t wish to take me to bed—”

“I don’t think I said that,” he said. “I said I wouldn’t. I didn’t say anything about my wishes in the matter.”

Her heart stopped.

“My apologies.” He cringed. “That was a wretched thing to say. You have nothing to fear from me, Miss Bennet. Please pretend that never crossed my lips.”

Now, she didn’t know what to say. It took her several moments to gather herself, and when she spoke again, her voice was a little hoarse. “Well, maybe there are other things you wish to pay me to do that aren’t… that aren’t *that*.”

“No,” he said immediately. “No, I don’t wish it to be that way between us at all.”

“But it is that way,” she said.

He rubbed his forehead.

“It would always be that way, even if you simply handed me that promissory note you spoke of before. We can never be equals, sir. I believe that has been the wedge between us all along, and now it is even a wider wedge.”

He scratched the side of his jaw. “Perhaps.”

Had some part of her wished he would argue with her about that?

“Well, here is what I would like to do.” He let out a low, rueful chuckle. “I would like to pay you enough that you are well-looked after. Enough that so I am the only man buying anything from you. But not enough that you feel you have embark on your plan immediately, because I want an excuse to come and see you again and again, for some time. I want to come regularly. I want you to save

your nights for me."

She drew in a shaky breath, unsure of how to respond to this pronouncement of his, which made her feel rather similarly to the way she'd felt when he touched her hand. Awash in tingles.

"I know it's abominable of me to wish such a thing," he said. "For a man who wishes to do the right thing, it's… well, shameful, really."

"I agree," she whispered. "My nights are yours."

He let out a noisy breath, and his gaze caught hers. His eyes were hard and yet hot, and she couldn't look away from him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elizabeth didn't want him to leave, but he did, of course, and without having touched her, not even touching her hand as he had before. But she still felt his gaze, which seemed to have burned its way inside her.

She changed out of her evening dress and into her clothes for bed, but she didn't get under the sheets. She stayed in the sitting room, eating cake. She didn't even cut it into pieces. She simply took her fork to the thing and ate bite after bite. She didn't know what to do with herself.

She was foolish.

Perhaps she'd first denied Mr. Darcy out of pride, but it was something else now. She should take his money and send him away. That was what she should do.

She didn't quite know what this something else was, but she had a notion that it was only going to bring her misery.

It was quite late when there was a knock at her door. She went to the door but did not open it. "Who is there?" she called through the wooden barrier.

"It's Georgie, love," said a voice. "Let me in."

She grimaced and yanked the door open. "I have told you over and over that I shall never call you Georgie."

George Wickham smirked. "You have to fight everything, don't you, Lizzy, love? It's one of the things I like the best about you. All that… fire." His voice dropped suggestively at the end.

"I don't have to let you into my house," she said. Indeed, she was standing in the doorway now, blocking his entry. He could easily push his way in, of course, but she could fight him off if she had to. She'd done it before. Wickham was horrid, but he was primarily a coward, and he disliked discomfort. He would do whatever he could to avoid it.

"Well, that would be a shame, because I have something for you," he said.

She sighed and moved out of the way.

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He ambled into the sitting room. "Why are there so many cakes?"

“That is none of your concern,” she said. “What do you have for me? Did you get the rest of the money owed me?” There had been a standing business agreement between the two of them in years past, but she had dissolved it after she had gotten married to Lieutenant Thistlehill. Even so, Wickham still owed her money from back then and continued to promise to make good on his debts but never did, of course.

Wickham took a coin from his pocket and tossed it to her. “There you go, love.”

She caught the coin. “Stop calling me love.”

He cut himself a slice of cake, but didn’t bother with a plate. He simply picked it up in one hand as he munched on it.

“This is only a small fraction of what you owe me.”

“No matter how much I pay you, you always claim there’s more.”

“I have an accounting of such things, and I shall show it to you—”

“What’s to stop you from writing down whatever sums you wish?” he said. “You’re a woman, anyway. Women have no head for numbers.”

“All right, well, thank you so much, Mr. Wickham, for this guinea. I can’t think how to properly express my gratitude to you for finally settling it upon me.” She glared at him. “Now, get out.”

“I have something else to talk to you about,” said Mr. Wickham. “A proposition for you. I heard a fellow talking about it, and I thought of you.”

“I’m not interested in such things, especially not if it involves you,” she said.

“How about if I have him pay you, and you give me my cut out of your earnings?” said Wickham.

She raised her eyebrows. “You must be awfully poverty stricken to offer me such a thing.”

“So, you’re interested?”

“I’m not.” She lifted her chin. “As it happens, I have a patron. He’s the jealous type, and he wants me all to himself. The cakes are for him.”

“This many cakes for one man? Is he dreadfully fat?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” said Elizabeth. “Fat and rich and lonely, just the way I like my men. So, you see, I am spoken for, and I have no time for you. Out.”

“You’re always so curt when it comes to me, Lizzy,” said Wickham. “You never used to be that way.”

“I can’t think why I wouldn’t have a good opinion of you,” she said sarcastically.

He moved closer to her. “Maybe you like the fact that I’m a bit of a scoundrel.”

"I really don't," she said flatly.

"Oh, come now, Lizzy, between us, there is—"

"Nothing," she said.

He reached out to touch her face.

She slapped his hand away. "Touch me again, and I shall grab you by the prick and bollocks and *twist.* And then I shall kick you while you're down."

Wickham closed his fingers into a fist and lowered his hand. "You're always overreacting, aren't you? But, as I say, I like your fire."

"I want you to leave."

"Could I have the guinea back if you're not going to agree to my proposition?"

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"Well, I need it," he said. "It's all I have, and I thought that you'd be in a better mood if I handed it over, but if you won't lift your skirts for that gentleman, I—"

"Mr. Wickham, you disgust me." She marched out of the room and back to the door, but she could still see him through the open doorway. She opened the door and nodded pointedly at the street.

Wickham's shoulders slumped. "Please, Lizzy. As a favor to me."

"Why would I do you favors?"

He huffed. "Fine," he mumbled. "I'll leave. But I'm taking another piece of cake with me." He cut himself one and carried it to the door. "Good night, love."

She shut the door tightly after him, latching it closed tightly once he was gone. Well, at least there was less cake to worry about.

* * *

The next morning, Darcy was greeted by a letter from Georgiana, who had heard he was in town and wanted to come, leaving her friend's house in the country. Pleased that he did not have to ask her to do something she didn't wish to do, he wrote enthusiastically back that Anne would be pleased of her company and sent the letter off.

Within a week, Georgiana was back at the town house. She seemed to know of every possible social event in the whole of the city. She would not stop talking about a ball, which would be taking place in a month's time, just a small, intimate affair since so many people had retired to the country. Georgiana, however, was insistent upon going, and Anne seemed excited about it, too.

Darcy was pleased they had something to occupy themselves, and he gave neither of them any mind.

Weeks passed.

At first, he only visited Elizabeth twice a week, but that soon became three days, and then four, and then he was simply there every evening. He doubled the amount that he had settled on her because

she must somehow buy food to offer him when he arrived, and she did not object. Then he told her to get different dresses, because if he had to look at her in those flimsy scarlet frocks anymore, he was going to lose his mind.

He thought it would be easier not to want her if she was wearing a more modest dress, but when she received him in her new clothing, it made no difference.

It was all very bad.

He wasn't doing anything specifically wrong. He and Elizabeth never touched. They talked of only innocent subjects, most notably about various books that they had both read, for there was not much else they could converse about easily without it bringing about the peculiarities of their situation. He did not wish to speak about his wife in her presence. She did not have any family for him to inquire about. Books, however, were easy. And often they did not speak at all, which she often teased him about, but without any real rancor. She said that he was frightfully bad at keeping up conversation, and he heartily agreed with her, laughing.

Then they would sometimes look at each other.

That probably went on too long.

There was some danger in the way the air around them seemed to feel when they looked upon each other, because the air seemed heavy, weighted, expectant, as if something was about to happen, and *nothing* could occur between them.

This was so true that it ought to mean that he ceased his visitation of her, but he could not do so. He chose not to think of why that might be.

One evening, he was in a bit of a hurry to get out of the house after dinner, in order to go to Elizabeth, but he was accosted, in his study, by Georgiana, who was in a high temper.

"Now is not a good time," he said to her.

"It is *never* a good time," said Georgiana.

"Now, now, that is not true," he said. "Besides, you speak as though you have attempted to address me before, and you have not."

"I most certainly have," she said. "I have been trying to speak to you since I arrived. You must realize that there was a reason I quit the country."

"You have not attempted to speak to me," he said.

"I have. Twenty times at least," she said. "But you are out late at that dreadful gentleman's club, and then you sleep away the morning and you read away the afternoon, and you never wish to speak to me, and you will speak to me *now*."

He furrowed his brow, because he had no memory of this, of Georgiana attempting to gain an audience from him, and he felt that

was rather odd. How could she be so convinced of it as to be this animated with him. It was most unlike her. Georgiana was typically rather quiet and subdued.

"Fitz," said Georgiana, snapping a finger in front of his face. "Attend to me."

"Yes." He blinked at her. "My apologies. What is this about?"

She squared her shoulders. "All right, well, as you know, my marriage prospects are pathetic since you forced me to come out when I was practically an old maid."

"I don't know any such thing. Have you truly cornered me to argue this same position of yours again? Georgiana, you are quite young. Very, very young."

"I know you have certain ideas about the caliber of man that I am meant to form a union with," she said. "But I think, considering my rapidly increasing age, even you will agree, that we must expand our reach a bit."

"Expand our reach? I'm afraid I have no idea of what you're even speaking of." He took out his pocket watch and looked at it. "You will find a husband. I am certain of it. But you must have some patience." He snapped his watch closed. "I really must be going."

"But, Fitz, I have not even spoken to you about what I am trying to speak to you about. And furthermore, if you are never accepting visitors, if someone wished to speak to you about my hand, you would not even receive them."

He tutted. "I assure you, I would. Have no fear on that score."

"How many people have you turned away in just the past week?"

"None," he said, annoyed.

"That is a falsehood," she said.

He blinked at her. "No, I have heard nothing of anyone coming to visit here. We haven't had any visitors."

"Something is wrong with you," Georgiana decided. "You have lost your ability to perceive reality."

"You are being incredibly dramatic," he said. "I do hope you outgrow this rather horrid phase of yours sometime soon." He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "I still love you, though, ladybird. Now, I must be off. We can speak tomorrow, hmm?"

"No," said Georgiana. "Don't leave."

He left.

* * *

Elizabeth sometimes had the most sordid thoughts before she went to sleep, and they were always about Mr. Darcy. They always involved Mr. Darcy touching her, or her touching Mr. Darcy, or…

Oh, it was awful.

When she had told Maria of her wicked wonderings about men

from her past, she had been quite serious. Sometimes she indulged herself in such silly sort of thoughts, and she had, of course, thought of Mr. Darcy in ways that weren't strictly proper.

After all, he had asked her to marry him, and if that had come to pass, she would have been duty-bound to bear him children, so she would have become quite intimately acquainted with Mr. Darcy without his clothes, so it was not surprising she'd thought about it.

Also, Mr. Darcy was in possession of the most intriguing set of broad shoulders she thought she had ever seen. She wondered about those shoulders uncovered and about the way the muscles in his arms might move under his skin. She wondered if his chest was hairless or not. And, of course, she couldn't help herself to think of other things. Once she was peeling off his clothes in her mind's eye, everything came off, and then she couldn't help but contemplate other parts of his body.

She would try to stop. She would roll over, face down into the pillow, and try to somehow force the images out of herself by smothering herself, but it didn't quite work.

The worst of it was that she knew she would see him again the very next evening, and she wouldn't be able to stop herself from thinking about it when she looked at him.

One evening when he arrived, she couldn't stop herself from blushing, and she busied herself over in the corner of the room, trying to fix up some tea for him. She had taken to making things other than cakes, now. It was nothing on par with a real dinner, but she would have sandwiches and sometimes some meat pies and other things more substantial for them both to eat. She had taken to waiting to have her evening meal until he appeared. He was a fixture in her life now. He was the most important fixture, indeed. Everything seemed to revolve around him.

"You don't need to serve me," he said. He was close.

She turned around, and he was standing right behind her, right exactly behind her, and she was face to face with his chest, and she blushed even harder.

"I thought we talked about this." His voice dropped to a lower, more intimate pitch.

"Yes, of course, it's only that I'm the host, and you're my guest—"

"No, I feel quite at home here," he said, reaching out to take the tea cup from her. Their fingers brushed and it went through her like a jolt. "I don't need to be waited on hand and foot, not in the least. I shall see to myself. That is what we agreed?"

"Yes," she whispered. They were too close, and she needed to back away from him.

He looked down at her, and his dark eyes were so very dark. His

lips parted. “Miss Bennet…”

Her lips parted.

A long, long moment passed between them.

He slowly set down the teacup he was holding.

She let out a ragged breath.

He took one of her hands in his.

She shut her eyes. Then she forced them open. “Er, if you feel so very at home, we might as well dispense with any formality, hadn’t we? You could call me Elizabeth. Or… even Lizzy. Or, I don’t know, Eliza, I suppose, if you like, but no one ever really called me that, truly, except…” Why was she talking so much?

“All right,” he murmured. “Then I think you could call me Fitzwilliam. No one really calls me that either, though, not amongst my family, because it becomes confusing when it’s everyone else’s last name. But Georgiana calls me Fitz, which is a bit less confusing. You could call me that, I suppose. Am I talking rather too much? I feel as though I may be.”

She laughed.

He laughed as well. His fingers were so very thick and strong where they were touching her own. “I am… this is… I made a promise that I would not touch you, and yet, here I am, doing it.”

“Oh,” she said, looking down at their joined hands. “Well, you could let go of me, if you wanted.”

“I don’t want to,” he said. “Not at all, not in the least. I know that I should, however.”

“Yes,” she said. “I suppose you should.”

He reached down and captured her other hand instead. He gripped both of them and tugged them against his chest. “You… you see, I don’t hold with men who don’t honor their marriage vows. I think it is appalling, in fact. What is the point of making a promise if you don’t intend to keep it?”

“No, I realize that,” she said. “Of course you mustn’t do anything that would be… improper.”

“I think this is a violation already, though.” He squeezed her fingers.

“You are only holding my hands,” she breathed.

“Yes, that’s all it is.” He nodded. “And I don’t love her, and I told her that when I proposed to her. I told her I *couldn’t*.”

“You did?” She thought of how dreadful that must have been for poor Miss de Bourgh.

“Yes, because I was sure that I could never love anyone the way I had loved you, and you were dead.”

“Oh, that’s…” She shook her head. “I never realized you were hopeless and dramatic in that way, Mr. Darcy.”

"I am not," he said, and he laughed again, a wilder laugh. "It is you, Miss—Elizabeth. You have brought it all out of me, and now I am miserable."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no." He shook his head. "It is a good misery. *Exquisite* misery. I… Oh, damnation, I should very much like to kiss you right now."

"All right," she said in a tiny voice.

He drew in a hissing breath.

She tensed, waiting.

His gaze found her lips. Then he looked at her eyes. Then he looked at her lips. "Damnation," he said again.

Then his mouth was on hers.

Oh.

Well, of course it would be wonderful, wouldn't it? Her heart clenched in a painful, lovely way. He kissed with just the right amount of pressure, not too forceful, not too gentle. His lips were warm and when they touched hers, it was like the wondrousness of intricate lace, so careful was he with her. His tongue didn't demand entrance the way some men's did. Instead, it was a tentative question, and he waited for her to accept him.

Then his tongue stroked hers, and she felt heat start to build in her belly, something powerful, something terrifyingly like an inferno, and she knew that if they kept kissing, that wall of flame would rise and build and burn them both to ash.

Pull away, she screamed at herself. But she couldn't seem to do it.

When the kiss did end, sometime later, she wasn't sure who had pulled away, or who had stopped it, but they were both panting and they were both badly affected. They staggered away from the other, and she actually put up a hand, as if to ward him off.

But she needn't have, because he was bent over, hand to his chest, looking distraught.

She struggled to catch her breath. She smoothed out her skirts. Her bosom heaved.

His gaze skittered over her and then he turned his back on her. "My deepest apologies."

She only gasped for air.

"We must never do that," he said. He was gasping, too.

"No, I don't think we should," she said.

He did not turn around, but he didn't move.

"You see, when you kiss me that way, it makes me want things," she said. "Things that you cannot give me. Things that I can never have. Things that… Please, sir, it is far, far too painful a thing to experience."

"For me as well." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I am so

very, very sorry." And then he turned away from her and went out of the room.

She heard the door open and close.

She was alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Darcy was on fire.

He was half-surprised that he didn't singe the door to the house when he let himself in or that his hand on the railing of the steps didn't cause the entire stairwell to go up in flame. But the feeling was contained within him, even though he thought surely that he couldn't contain it.

Upon reaching the top of the stairwell, he made for his bedroom, and his valet was sitting outside on a chair, head back, snoring softly.

Darcy stopped short.

He swallowed. Hard.

Then he turned on his heel and walked. He went down the hallway and stopped in front of another door. He hesitated there, one fist lifted to knock.

He shut his eyes.

He turned back and looked down the hall, the way he had just come.

Then, he seized the doorknob and let himself inside.

"Hello?" came a voice from the darkness, frightened and small.

"Anne," he said in a choked voice. "It's me."

"Oh," she said in a different voice. "Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes." He reached up with trembling hands to untie his cravat. "Are you… would you mind if I…?"

"Please," she said, eager. In the scant light of the window, he saw that she had sat up in bed. "You must come to me anytime you like, of course."

"Of course," he whispered.

Sometime later, he lay under the sheets of her bed, completely divested of his clothes. He was warm, however. It was too warm for blankets. He gazed up at the ceiling of her bedchamber.

She was tucked against him, small and soft. She was undressed as well. She was running her fingers through the hair on his chest.

He absently tightened his arm around her, his fingers splayed over her hip.

He felt guilty.

How could it be that no matter what he did, he felt guilty?

She is my wife, he thought to himself. *I am meant to be with her in this way. I belong in her bed.*

And yet, it was a betrayal, all the same.

Anne sighed happily. "That was very, very nice."

He turned his head to kiss her forehead. "Yes," he agreed. It *had* been nice. Maybe that was why it felt like a betrayal. Maybe he shouldn't be capable of this with someone else if he loved her so badly. Elizabeth.

I can never have her this way, he thought.

"You aren't only saying that?" said Anne.

"What?" He was confused.

She propped herself up, leaning on his chest, her hair in disarray. She seemed young and vulnerable and she was smiling in such a way that it hurt his heart. Somehow, being with her was also a betrayal to her. She bowed her head shyly. "If there's something you wish I was doing differently, Fitzwilliam, maybe it's easier to talk about when we're not wearing clothes."

He reached up to cup her cheek with one of his hands. "You are quite lovely, darling. I wish you would stop thinking I have found some fault with you."

"But you have not come to me in over six months," she said. "I have heard other wives speak of a gradual decline in such activities after the honeymoon, but I do not think that you and I… why I could likely count the total number of times on my fingers."

"I am busy," he murmured. He traced her bottom lip with her thumb.

"I think I should tempt you away from your business," she said. "If you won't tell me how, perhaps I must try other things."

There was a coyness to her tone that he found pleasant. He chuckled. "You do tempt me."

"I don't think I do."

"I have not properly considered you, perhaps," he said. There was nothing wrong with his wife. She was charming, in fact. She was rather a pretty little thing, and he could not deny that he liked the feeling of her in his arms. He was a fool. He must stop this madness with Elizabeth and redirect himself. Obviously, this was where he belonged.

"Why not?" she said.

"Because I am a very stupid man," he said.

She laughed. She leaned forward and kissed him. "Perhaps a little stupid, but not *very* stupid."

He chuckled again.

"There isn't anything you want me to try? Anything at all?"

His chuckle became a full-fledged laugh. "I am probably even a

more stupid man for not telling you something wicked to do, but no, darling, I promise you. You please me just as you are."

"Truly?" Her smile would break him. He was sure of it.

"Truly," he said.

* * *

Darcy was sorting through papers on his desk the following morning. There seemed to be a great many letters, which seemed to have piled up for some time. How was it that he hadn't noticed these? Had he been so distracted?

Why, here was one from Charles Bingley. It had been quite some time since they'd spoken. He wondered what Bingley had to say. He broke the seal and there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he called.

"Someone to see you, sir," called a voice from without. "I suppose you wish me to say you're not at home, as usual?"

Oh, dear. What had Georgiana been saying the night before? Something about his turning away visitors? He got up from his desk and went over to open the door.

The footman there was surprised to see him.

"Do you come and ask me about visitors often?"

"Well, when they arrive," said the man.

"You know, I don't feel as if I've even heard you," he muttered. "I suppose I always agree to say I'm not at home."

"You usually grunt, sir," said the footman. "Which all of us have determined is an affirmative, and we know you are busy."

"I've been distracted," said Darcy, rubbing his forehead. "Dreadfully distracted." He squared his shoulders. "Well, who is it that's here to see me?"

"A Mr. Bingley, I believe."

"Oh," said Darcy. "What a coincidence. I was about to read a letter from him. Of course, I shall see him. Show him into the drawing room downstairs and I shall be with him shortly."

"Very good, sir." The footman nodded, but Darcy could tell he was surprised.

It's as if I've been under a spell, thought Darcy. *And kissing her broke it.*

Well, it would all have to end now, of course. He would go to her and tell her that. He thought she would understand. She had seemed as badly affected by their kiss as he did.

It must be difficult for her, after all she'd been through, to be treated the way she was by him, as if she was…

Oh, Lord, he was a cad.

He slammed a palm into the door of his study. He'd paid for her and bought her time and *told* her he wished to keep her there, to own

her nights.

She wanted to initiate her plan and reclaim her respectability. He had all but demanded she remain a strumpet for his pleasure.

Well, he'd fix all that, too.

But he couldn't think of any of this now, of course. He picked a speck off the lapel of his jacket and smoothed it out. Then he went downstairs to greet Bingley.

"Darcy, you're all right," said Bingley as Darcy shook his hand firmly.

"Of course, I'm all right."

"Well, after I got no response to my last two letters, I began to think something was amiss," said Bingley.

"Two letters?" Darcy cringed. He settled down in a chair in the sitting room and gestured for Bingley to do the same. "I'm so sorry, old friend. I found one of them, but I haven't had the chance to read it. I'm afraid I've been rather distracted and busy as of late, and I have a pile of letters to get through."

"Well, I thought it might be something like that," said Bingley. "What brings you to town after the close of the Season, anyway? It must be some sort of business."

"Er, yes. Business indeed."

"If you are thinking of making some investments, Darcy, I wish you would come to me before making any commitments. I'm not saying that you're not knowledgeable, but there is some difference between running an estate and running a business—"

"Don't worry," said Darcy. "I wouldn't think of doing such a thing without asking you about it first. You needn't worry. The business is nothing like that."

"So, what is it?"

"Oh, did you come here to talk business, truly?"

"No," said Bingley. "I didn't. But I would probably enjoy talking of that more than of the subject that I came here to speak to you of."

"Oh, that doesn't sound promising exactly."

"It's my sister," said Bingley.

"What of your sister? Which sister?"

"Caroline, of course," said Bingley. "She is still not married."

"I can't see how this could be surprising," said Darcy dryly. Then he cringed. "Forgive me, I'm sorry. I did not mean—"

"No, you're right. You're right, of course. I have had many conversations with her about how she must set her sights a bit lower, and yet she will not hear anything that I have to say. She thinks rather too highly of herself, and she is not even good company. All she does is spend her time declaring this thing or that thing below her standards. I am sick to death of her myself. Which is why I must get

rid of her."

Darcy laughed.

Bingley laughed. "I shouldn't have said it that way, should I? What I meant is that it's high time my sister Caroline was happily settled in a marriage. I was hoping you had some reason for being in town now that had something to do with Georgiana."

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Drat," said Bingley.

"There's a ball, though," said Darcy. "It's in less than a week at this point. I suppose maybe there are husbands to seek there. I know nothing of the marriage mart, I must say."

"Nor I," said Bingley. "You know how I met my wife. You were dead set against her—"

"Yes, but I did say I was sorry about that, didn't I? Rather more than once?"

"All is forgiven, my friend," said Bingley with a laugh. "Well, I could go to a ball, but Jane can't. She's increasing far too much to be seen in public."

"Oh, she is expecting?" said Darcy. "Congratulations, I don't know if I knew this. Your second child, then?"

"Yes," said Bingley, smiling widely. "Thank you. At any rate, I'd rather not go to a ball, however. But we will be in town for at least two weeks, so… would it be a dreadful imposition if I asked you to drag Caroline along with you?"

"Certainly not," said Darcy. "What a capital idea."

"Excellent," said Bingley. "I'll likely have to wait to marry her off until the winter, I suppose, when everyone comes back to town. But I've increased her dowry."

"Truly?" said Darcy.

"Well, we can afford it. The land that I've purchased has increased my income and the rest of my business is also going well. What I can't afford is having Caroline underfoot any longer, especially not with the way she treats my wife. Jane is an angel, and she would never say anything untoward about anyone, but I know it hurts her, and I declare that Caroline does it out of spite because she enjoys it."

"How much have you increased her dowry?"

Bingley named an amount.

Darcy's eyes widened. "You really do want rid of her, don't you? At that rate, she might be able to set her sights higher after all."

"That was my thought," said Bingley. "It will be worth it if it works."

"Well, perhaps she'll find someone at this ball."

"I'm ever so grateful for that, Darcy."

"Don't mention it," said Darcy. "It's no trouble at all, and Georgiana

loves Caroline, after all."

* * *

"Oh, *anyone* but Caroline Bingley," came the sound of Georgiana Darcy's voice, carrying down the hallway as Colonel Fitzwilliam was shown into the Darcy town house.

Richard couldn't help but chuckle under his breath. He nodded to the footman who'd shown him in. "I think I'll just head in that direction, actually. No need to announce me. I am family, after all."

"Well, sir, it's no trouble to announce you," said the footman.

But Richard was already past the man. He made his way into the sitting room, where Georgiana was standing over Darcy, who was seated at a desk in the corner and chewing on the end of his quill as he surveyed a piece of paper.

"Now, now, Georgiana, Miss Bingley has always been quite congenial to you," said Darcy.

"Congenial, you call it? Bootlicking is more like it," said Georgiana. She straightened, lifting her voice into a high-pitched mimicry. "'Oh, Georgiana, how lovely your hair is. Does it curl naturally? Oh, Georgiana, I have never seen such fingers as yours, so long and elegant. Oh, Georgiana, you are so perfect in every way.'"

Darcy glanced at her. "I fail to see what is so awful about being complimented so often."

"You do?" said Georgiana, folding her arms over chest. "Well, you don't seem to like it when she pours it on thick with you."

Darcy set his pen in its inkwell. He noticed Richard and gave him a nod. "She does that less now that I am married."

"Oh, yes, there's nothing else she can get from you," said Georgiana. "But she wants to be seen as my dear friend so that she can use my position to rise in society. Everything is about appearance with her. And, Fitz, honestly, she is a dreadful snob and has no reason to be thus. Furthermore, she kept not-so-subtly trying to hint that I should marry her brother."

"Who is married now to someone else." Darcy picked up his pen again. "So, no worries on that score." He began to scratch out something on the paper.

"Fitz," said Georgiana.

"Mmm," said Darcy.

"You're not listening to me again."

"Mmm," repeated Darcy.

Georgiana rounded on Richard. "Good morning, Richard."

"Morning, Georgiana," said Richard.

"Will you strangle my brother for me?"

"Oh, with pleasure," he said.

"Can you convince him that we can't take Caroline Bingley with us

to the ball this weekend?"

Darcy spoke up. "I've already promised her brother." He was still scribbling.

"But it's insupportable," said Georgiana. "Positively horrid. You know how she is, Richard."

"I do think I've met her once or twice," said Richard. "She's the one who followed Darcy around like a little spaniel dog."

"Yes, and with the yapping as well," said Georgiana.

Darcy was still writing. "That's not very nice."

"What are you even writing?" said Georgiana, turning back to her brother. She peered over his shoulder. "Who is Lizzy?"

Darcy covered the paper. He glared at Georgiana. "This is private."

"Oh, pardon me," said Georgiana. "As we all know, when we wish to conduct private correspondences, we sit down and write them in the midst of the sitting room where anyone might see."

"It's not correspondence. I'm only trying to work out what I'm going to say to—" Darcy crumpled the paper up in one fist. "Never mind."

Richard arched an eyebrow at his cousin. Lizzy, hmm? Well, he wished he could say he was surprised, but he wasn't.

Darcy was on his feet. "I'll go up to my study then. For privacy." He stalked toward the door.

"Wait, Fitz!" called Georgiana. "This is not what I wanted to talk to you about. We still haven't talked about it."

Darcy quit the room, shutting the door behind him.

Georgiana threw herself down on a settee, uttering a cry of rage.

Richard stroked his chin. "I don't suppose this is a good time to come and call upon Darcy, is it?"

"There's never a good time," said Georgiana.

"Ah," said Richard. "I suppose he's always busy. Out all night, only comes home in the morning?"

"I don't think it's *all* night," said Georgiana. She looked at him. "I should have assumed you were part of that gentleman's club where he goes."

"Gentleman's club," repeated Richard, shaking his head. "So, that's where he says he is."

"What do you mean? Isn't he?"

"Never mind that," said Richard.

"Where else would he be?" said Georgiana. "You don't think he has a mistress or something wretched, do you? He and Anne haven't even been married very long, and Fitz would never do such a thing."

"It's a gentleman's club," said Richard. "You're right. I'm the one who took him there for the first time. It's my fault. I shall have a talk with him."

“See that you do,” said Georgiana. “And tell him that I’d like to get married sometime before I drop over dead.”

“All right,” said Richard, confused. “I’ll be sure to relay that.”

Georgiana glared at him.

“What?” he said, flinching. “Don’t look at me that way.”

“Go and talk to him. What are you waiting for?” she said.

“Right,” he said.

But when he got up the stairs to Darcy’s study, a servant there said that Darcy had left strict instructions that he not be disturbed.

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth thought that Mr. Darcy looked embarrassed and strange when he appeared at her door that evening, but she supposed that was only natural, considering the way they had parted the evening before. She felt embarrassed too, especially for the thing she had said at the end.

She felt hotly ashamed of herself for having admitted that she had any desires to be anything other than what she was. There may have once been a time when she could have conceivably become Mr. Darcy's wife, but that time had passed. Such a thing was no longer meant for one such as she.

The idea that she could dream of anything else was something she kept close in her own being, tightly wrapped inside her chest. It was not meant for Mr. Darcy's ears. She heartily regretted having said it aloud.

But she had decided that it would be best if she did not speak of it, or of the kiss that had passed between them. She was determined, instead, to pretend as if nothing had happened at all, and that everything was normal between them. So, she invited him in, and they went into the sitting room.

She was not sure what she should do about the small meat pies she had sitting out. Mr. Darcy had made much of serving himself, but that had gotten them into the mess previously, so perhaps it was best if she played the host. *Yes, we shall return to a bit of formality,* she thought. *Just the thing.* "Shall I make you a plate?"

He was standing in the doorway, clasping his hands in front of him.

"Well, sit down, then," she said. "You're making me frightfully nervous towering in the doorway in that manner."

"I must apologize to you," he said.

"No, there is no need." She shook her head. "I think that we'd best not speak about last evening. There is no reason to dwell upon it. We shall simply carry on with the pretense that it never occurred, don't you agree?"

"I must apologize for all of this. For this entire arrangement. I should never have have offered such a deplorable thing as this."

She went still, then, for she suddenly realized what was happening.

He was going to say that he wasn't going to come back. A heaviness began to form in the pit of her stomach.

"You specifically said that you wished to put a plan in action so that you could get out of this house, find respectability, and see your family again. I told you I wished to keep you here, owning your nights, and it makes me no better than any man who has trespassed against you already."

"Oh, that is not true." Her voice did not sound the way it should, and she cursed it. Her entire body felt heavy now. "Why, you have hardly touched me, sir—"

"That does not matter." He was firm on this point. "I have treated you as though you were, in fact, something I could buy, and that is appalling. You are not a *thing*, madam, you are a woman, and there is no—"

"Well, I forced you into it," she said, and now her voice was noticeably strained. "I said that I would not take any money from you else. You wanted to give me a promissory note and to be done with me, but I wouldn't let you." Oh, Lord, she was going to cry. She offered up a desperate prayer for God to hold back her tears.

He licked his lips.

"Perhaps I shall still insist upon such a thing," she said, lifting her chin.

"What do you mean?" Now, it seemed to her that his voice wasn't strong either.

"Perhaps…" She was forced to pause as a lump rose in her throat. She took a deep breath, getting herself back under control. "Perhaps I shall say that I shan't take anything from you unless you come to see me."

He looked stricken. "I am all astonishment, madam. Why would you say such a thing?"

She didn't answer.

"Don't you see what it makes this between us?" he said, and he was stepping closer.

"I think," she said, and now she didn't care how her voice quavered, "that I said it would be thus no matter what, given our relative stations in life."

He came closer. "Then take the money."

"Not if it means you go away and never come back." She lifted her face to his, and there was somehow strength in declaring herself in such a bald way, though she didn't know why, because she was now admitting her own weakness. However, it banished her tears.

He closed the distance between them. "Miss Bennet. Lizzy. I am *married*." But his voice was gentle, even pleading.

"I'm not asking you to break your vows. I'm asking for your

company, not your… touch."

"But it *does* break my vows. You and I both know that."

"No, we'll be stronger," she said. "*I'll* be stronger. I can do that. But if you are gone, if I lose you again…" She didn't even know how to finish the sentence.

His jaw twitched. His face twisted and his chin trembled.

"Fitz," she whispered.

His hand lurched out and hovered in the air next to her face. "I don't think that is what will happen if I keep coming to see you. I don't think we'll be strong."

"You're wrong." The bottom had gone out of her voice.

His fingertips made contact with her cheekbone. He brushed them softly over her face, tracing her jaw. "If you won't take the money from me, then the right thing for me to do is to determine not to see you at all, to leave you to your own devices."

Shivers went through her from his touch. "No."

"Everything I do hurts both of you if I continue this." His fingers trailed down her neck.

She tilted her head to one side, allowing him better access to her skin. "No."

He traced her clavicle. "Do you know where I went after I left you last night?"

"You went home," she breathed.

He pulled his hand back. "I went to my wife's bed."

She started at the words. She was unprepared for the effect that they had on her, the way that they tunneled into her and stabbed her from the inside out, a dozen tiny points of jealousy and hurt. She drew back, putting her hand to her neck, where she could still feel the imprint of his touch.

"You see?" he said. "This has to end, Lizzy. This is a disaster for all of us."

She wrapped her arms around herself, hunching her shoulders.

"It's one thing for me to suffer," he said. "I deserve it. The guilt, for me, is my own burden to bear. But the pain it inflicts upon you, after all you have already endured, is too much, and I can't be responsible for it. And poor Anne has done nothing wrong."

She heard it in his voice when he said his wife's first name. He cared for Anne. This had another painful affect on Elizabeth's insides. She pressed her lips together in a firm line.

He looked her over. "My apologies, Lizzy. I ought not have said it in such a way."

"You meant it to hurt me," said Elizabeth quietly. "That was your intent."

"No, I…" He hung his head. "Perhaps."

“It is foolish for me to be hurt,” she said briskly. “You are married. You must bed your wife. It is your duty to do so. I have already told you that I will never welcome you into my bed, so you have little recourse but to see to your own needs. It is no barrier. I would only ask that you keep the discussion of such activities to yourself in the future.” She took a deep breath and unwound her hands. She smoothed out her skirt.

“There can be no future,” said Mr. Darcy.

“You will leave me, then, to finish adding to my fortune by taking other men into my bed?”

“You will take the rest that you need from me now.”

“I will *not*.” There was steel in her tone.

“Are you being so disagreeable because I hurt you?”

“I have nothing but scraps,” she said. “That is all that has been given me in this life. Misfortune has haunted my footsteps. You are the only vaguely good thing that has happened to me in some time. I will not give you up, no matter how bittersweet it is.”

He bowed his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

She should be ashamed of herself for declaring herself in such a way, but she wasn’t, because she was assured of his feelings for her. How could she not be? He struggled now with duty, but he wanted her, and she knew it. Why should she care if he knew that his feelings were returned?

He lifted his face to look at her. “I don’t wish to give you up either.”

“Then don’t.”

“But it’s *wrong*,” he said, and his voice cracked.

“Everything is wrong,” she said, spreading her hands helplessly.

“You don’t understand. I am not the sort of man who…” He didn’t finish the sentence. “I strive always, Lizzy, to do the right thing.”

She supposed she knew this about him. In fact, this was the thing about him that she so firmly disliked, his slavish devotion to honor and respectability. Hadn’t he dwelt upon that for far too long when he was proposing to her in the first place? Well, if she had been a degradation to him then, what could she be now but a ruin?

Still, she could see how deeply he wanted that ruin, and she was driven beyond her own pride now. She could not say what force it was that propelled her to beg him, but here it was. This man destroyed what little was left of her.

“Don’t force me to make the choice in this way,” he said, looking up at her. “Please. I’ll give you the money, and then you can buy the house in a more respectable part of town as you wish. It doesn’t have to be the end. You will reenter the society of your family, and I am connected to Mr. Bingley, who is married to your sister. It is not as if we shall never see each other again.”

“It won’t be the same thing, though, will it?”

“I could call upon you,” he said.

“Call upon a widow alone in her home?” She raised her eyebrows.

“I could,” he said firmly. “I could do whatever it is that I liked.”

“Yes, well, if I have a reputation to guard, then I cannot do as I like.”

“You are a widow,” he said. “It wouldn’t be so very scandalous.”

“It would,” she said.

“No one would be paying any attention to you,” he said.

“If my family knows…” She swallowed. “If Jane knows…”

He sighed. “I suppose you are right. It would not be considered a respectable thing for me to call upon you alone frequently, not from your family’s point of view.”

“Your wife would hear of it,” said Elizabeth. “She would not think it was respectable.”

“No,” he said.

“So, if I take the money from you, then all of this between us must end, and I am not ready for that yet, and I don’t think you are either.”

He drew in a breath, and his broad shoulders rose up formidably before sagging again as he let out the air. “Damnation.” He stalked out of the room without saying goodbye.

She heard the door close.

She was alone again.

CHAPTER TEN

He didn't come the next night.

She waited, everything set out for him, and he didn't appear. This crushed her. She lay on the sofa in the sitting room, where he usually sat, and she sobbed until there were no sobs left. But then, the tears gone, she felt angry, and she pulled the tablecloth off the table, scattering the tea and the food she'd made.

But then, staring at the mess—shattered teacups and ruined sandwiches—she only felt despair.

She left it to the morning to clean up.

That evening, she didn't prepare anything for him, hoping this would somehow mean that fate would intervene and he would arrive. If she hadn't prepared for him, he would come.

Except he didn't.

So, the following day, she hired a coach, which took her to Maria Lucas's country house. Maria was surprised to see her, but didn't make one uncomplimentary comment about her unannounced arrival. She invited her for luncheon, which they shared with Jacob, her oldest son, and in the afternoon, they went for a walk in the garden while he napped. Elizabeth begged for the baby, and Maria surrendered him easily enough. They walked together, Elizabeth's arms wrapped around the sweet-smelling bundle, who went immediately to sleep, rocked by the easy movement of their walk.

"I haven't heard from you since that strongly worded letter you sent me," said Maria.

"If you want me to apologize about that, you will be unsatisfied," said Elizabeth. "You betrayed my confidence."

"Well, they knew you were alive," said Maria.

"Yes, I was very foolish to have engaged with Colonel Fitzwilliam in that manner," sighed Elizabeth.

"What has happened?" said Maria. "I thought you would explain your little scheme to Mr. Darcy, and he would immediately offer you the funds in order to put it to work."

"Oh, he did," said Elizabeth. "I refused him."

"Why?" said Maria, turning to look at her.

"Because… because…"

“Because you are in love with him,” said Maria in a low voice.

“I am not!” Elizabeth protested. “How can I be? He is the most horrid man that I think I have ever met!”

Maria laughed softly. “So, you are torn, then. You could go to your family, but then you must give Mr. Darcy up. If you become his mistress, then you cannot have the reconciliation with your family that you desire.”

“There is no discussion of my becoming Mr. Darcy’s mistress,” said Elizabeth sulkily.

“But surely, if so much time has passed—”

“Did I not tell you I would never let Mr. Darcy bed me?” Elizabeth’s voice was so shrill that the baby stirred a bit in her arms. She shushed her, bouncing a bit, and the babe quieted.

“I am very confused,” said Maria.

“He has been calling on me,” said Elizabeth. “And we only talk. Nothing else. But it is… oh, I don’t know how to explain how quickly his visits have become everything to me. I live for them. And then, I was stupid, and I let him kiss me, and now he wants to end it all, because he does not want to betray his wife.”

“Truly?” said Maria. “He is attached to his wife, then?”

“I think so,” said Elizabeth.

“No, I think not,” said Maria, reconsidering. “Why, when he came to me, I saw the change that came over his countenance when he spoke of you, and he is quite badly affected by you, my dear.”

“Well, you know how it can be,” said Elizabeth. “When there is more than one person that one is being intimate with, there can be affection for both of them. I have had regulars, men who came back again and again, and when that happens, sometimes something is borne of the… the frequency.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never experienced that,” said Maria quietly.

Elizabeth rubbed her forehead. “You are lucky.”

“I thought that you hated taking men into your bed.”

“Why do you think I hate it?” said Elizabeth. “It is so frightfully confusing, isn’t it? It is so hard on a woman’s heart, taking pieces of it every time she is treated as if she is worth nothing more than her cunny.”

Maria flinched.

“Oh, never mind,” muttered Elizabeth. “I am likely the only harlot in England to feel affection for the men who—”

“You are obviously not,” said Maria, taking the baby from Elizabeth, as if to emphasize her point.

Elizabeth’s arms felt empty now, and she didn’t know what to do with them. It would be easier if all the men were awful, truly, if they were wretches like Mr. Wickham who had no regard for women at all,

or if even if they were like the man who had taken his fists to Maria's face. At least it was easy enough to know where a woman stood with a blackguard. The men who weren't bad men, though. It was hard to know what to do about men like that.

Maria stopped walking, gazing out at the fields that surrounded her house. They did not belong to her, but they were empty and full of rambling weeds and wildflowers. There was something quite calming about the view.

Elizabeth drank it up, taking gulps of it, letting it wash through her soul. "Of course, nothing I have felt for any man has compared to what I feel for Mr. Darcy."

"Because you love him."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth admitted, feeling defeated. "The kiss did make it worse. I have vowed not to allow him near me again. Of course, when he came back, he touched my face, and I did not stop him. But now, he's gone. He said he would not come back, and he hasn't, and I don't know what to do."

"You must make a choice," said Maria. "You must commit to being his mistress—"

"I can't do that!"

"Well, then, you must beg him for the money and put your scheme into place. I am certain he will give it to you. He cares about you. But if you can't be with him, you must give him up."

"He wouldn't take me as a mistress, anyway. He considers such things wrong. He would see it as a breach of honor. He has made vows to his wife, and he will not go against them. He is very devoted to propriety."

"Then it seems your choice is made for you," said Maria.

"I suppose it is," said Elizabeth.

* * *

"You're quiet," Richard murmured. He was standing in the corner next to Mr. Darcy, who was gazing blankly into a glass of punch. They were at the ball that had been spoken of when Richard visited earlier in the week. Richard had only just arrived, and he had sought out Darcy here to speak to him. He'd been unable to see his cousin before this. Darcy had spent the entire rest of the week shut up in either his study or his bedchamber. According to his servants, he was afflicted by some malady. Looking at the man now, Richard almost believed it. Darcy seemed drawn and pale.

"I'm always quiet," said Darcy, still quite interested in his punch. "Isn't that what's said of me? Haven't you yourself said that I am an old man before my time, unwilling to engage in gaiety?"

"Yes," said Richard. "So, if I comment on it now, it means that you are quiet indeed. I begin to think that perhaps there is no reason for

me to speak to you, after all, however. You have broken it off with her, haven't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Don't say her name." Darcy turned to look at him with something like hatred. "You've done enough with her. You can kindly cease to speak of her henceforth."

Richard felt the same shame he'd felt before welling up in him. "I must apologize again, cousin. You know that I am wretched over my actions."

Darcy's fingers tightened on his cup of punch and Richard worried Darcy would squeeze too hard and crush it with his fist. "I don't want your apologies."

"I think giving her up is the right thing," said Richard. "I realize it must be difficult. I know how you feel about her. But if you have settled upon her the rest of the money which she requires—"

"No," said Darcy. "She refuses to take it."

"You cannot be serious."

Darcy let out a harsh laugh. "She is so abominably stubborn, that woman. I can't be near her, and yet I can't bear to be away from her, and I don't know what to do—"

"I'll handle it," said Richard.

"She's not going to take the money from you."

"Clearly not," said Richard. "She has her pride. I shall contrive to get it to her another way, one that does not wound her. Cease to worry about her welfare, then, and concentrate on your obligations. Your sister wishes me to deliver a message to you, but I can't say I understand what it all means. She is quite adamant that she wishes to get married."

"I am not insensible to this," said Darcy, annoyed.

"Well, Georgiana clearly wants something from you."

"What?"

"I don't know. But you should find out. You should stop wasting all of your time thinking about Elizabeth and think about your sister. Think about your wife. You—"

"Don't lecture me, Richard. You, of all people, have no right to judge anything about me."

"Elizabeth Bennet's death nearly destroyed you," said Richard. "Now, she has come back from the grave, and she will complete that destruction. I know you, Darcy, and if you were a different man, it might be no matter. You would simply have her, keep her, and continue the rest of your life as well. It would be fractured, and it would not be perfect, but you would recognize she could only ever be your mistress, and you would accept that difficult fact. You, however,

are incapable of such a thing, and attempting it would tear you asunder. So, leave her. Leave her now before it becomes more difficult. And trust that I shall see to her welfare. I owe her, Darcy, after my sins against her. All right?"

Darcy didn't say anything.

Richard sighed. "I shan't continue to engage you on this subject. Where *is* that sister of yours, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know. Likely, she is trying to get away from Miss Bingley."

"Ah, yes. I remember now that she was to accompany you here. Why is that? I did not discover the reason."

"Her brother is quite anxious that she find a husband. He's increased her dowry a great deal."

"Oh?" said Richard. "What is the going price for Miss Bingley?"

Darcy told him.

"That much?" said Richard. "Well, how interesting."

Darcy scoffed. "You wouldn't wish to marry her."

"I don't know. I've just caught sight of Georgiana. Is Miss Bingley the tall one next to her? She is not ugly."

"Oh, come now. You have heard Miss Bingley speak."

"Very little."

"Well, if she thinks highly of you, she does not have an original thought in her head. All she does is repeat back to you what she thinks you want to hear. And she buries you in ridiculous compliments."

"Yes, this sounds like a trial indeed."

Darcy laughed again. "If she does not think highly of you, I'm afraid she has quite a sharp tongue."

"Well," said Richard, "what does she know of me? Do you think she would think highly of me?"

"I did not think you had any desire to get married."

"I've sworn off whores, haven't I? What is left to me?" Richard straightened the tie of his cravat. "I don't think I've spoken to her in years. Do I have to be introduced again?"

"You know the answer to that is no."

"I don't. You're the one who keeps all that pedantry in your head like a woman." He took a deep breath. "She'll remember I'm the son of an earl, yes? That will impress her?"

"Are you quite honestly feeling some anxiety about speaking to Miss Bingley, of all people? That is preposterous, Richard. It is unthinkable."

"Good night, Darcy," said Richard dryly. He sauntered off in the direction of the women.

Georgiana looked up at him and brightened. Before he had quite

reached them, she called out to him.

He quickened his pace and joined them in a moment. “You are looking very lovely tonight, my sweet cousin.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Georgiana. “Have you come to ask me to dance, because I should be quite pleased by such an offer.”

He had been going to ask Miss Bingley, but he could not deny Georgiana now. “Well, certainly. I should be honored.”

“Excellent,” said Georgiana. She seized his hands and practically dragged him away. They took to the floor just as a waltz began to play, which meant that they would not change partners throughout the dance.

Together, they began to move.

“Thank you ever so,” said Georgiana. “Miss Bingley’s voice gives me a headache. Anne is so much more suited to speaking to her than I am.”

“Anne speaks very little,” said Richard.

“Precisely,” said Georgiana. “Miss Bingley can keep up the conversation quite well for two people.”

“Is she really so terrible?”

“She is a virago of the worst order,” said Georgiana. “You have never met someone so very disagreeable. Richard, you know that I do not say this lightly. I get along with everybody, and I am polite to everyone, even Miss Bingley, but she tries my patience.”

“It seems that a great many things try your patience these days,” said Richard, amused, for it was not often that his cousin was in such high temper, and both times he had seen her recently, she had been thus.

“Perhaps,” said Georgiana. “But I begin to believe that the problem lies with me, that I have allowed too many insults to wash over me, ignoring them. If I have any hope of ever finding happiness, I think I must find a spine, cousin. I am not so young anymore.”

“Yes, you are what, now? Nineteen? You are ancient.”

“You mock me, but we both know that age is different for women,” she said. “I must marry this Season. Another one will mean that I am quite done for.”

“I own that things are different for women,” said Richard, “but I also think that you are falling victim to the weaknesses of your age. Everything seems dire before you are twenty, and it very rarely is.”

“You don’t understand anything, Richard,” said Georgiana.

He laughed. “I was your age once, too.”

“Yes, but everything was different then,” said Georgiana.

He laughed again. “Oh, well, then, I suppose you must be right. I couldn’t possibly understand.”

“No, you could not,” she said.

After their dance, Richard meant to seek out Miss Bingley, but he did not see her when he returned to the spot where he had found Georgiana. Anne was there, but she was preoccupied with staring across the room at her husband.

"Have you seen Miss Bingley?" he said.

"She's over there," said Anne, waving her left hand but not taking her gaze from Darcy.

Richard turned to look at the man, who still had that same glass of punch, untouched. "You are permitted to go to him, you know, Mrs. Darcy. He is your husband."

Anne looked up at him. "Am I, though? If I go to him, will he even be present enough to acknowledge me?"

"Force him to acknowledge you," said Richard. "He can be a difficult man, Anne, but he is honorable, and I know he takes his duties to you very seriously."

"Yes," said Anne. "I am his duty. That is all I am." Her lower lip trembled, and she put her hand against it, covering it. "Pardon me, Richard. I think I must take some air."

Well, that had been the wrong thing to say to her. Dash it all.

And where was Miss Bingley?

He scanned the dance floor, but he didn't see her amongst those dancing. Georgiana already had another partner. She was laughing and throwing back her head and the man with her was laughing as well.

Richard looked around the periphery, but he didn't see Miss Bingley on the sidelines either.

She must have gone elsewhere, perhaps to find some refreshment. He set off for the tea room, but before he got there, he noticed a door open, leading out of doors, and he heard a sound very like a sob coming from beyond it.

He paused, listening, and he heard another one.

Well, he must see to that first. Likely, it would be a passel of women already out there, soothing some girl who'd been disappointed, and he would see that all would be aright in a bit. Then he would be on his way.

Except he found Miss Bingley outside, sitting on a set of steps that descended into the garden, sobbing into her gloves.

He sat down next to her.

She looked up, startled.

"It can't be as bad as all that, can it?"

She sniffed. Her nose was red and her eyes were bloodshot, and she looked frightful, but he still thought that she was a tolerably pretty girl, when all was said and done. "Please," she said, her voice thick, "I wish to be alone."

He offered her his handkerchief. “Ah, yes, that is quite the way of it. I also attend balls when I wish solitude.”

She dried her eyes, her breath hitching. “I didn’t w-want to come to the ball, but Charles insisted.”

“Charles, meaning your brother?” he said. “You remember me, don’t you? It has been some years. I am Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy’s cousin.”

“The son of the Earl of Matlock, yes,” she said. “Of course I remember you.”

He smiled. “Very good, then. Now, why wouldn’t you wish to come to a ball? Balls are great fun.”

“Perhaps they used to be, when I was young,” said Miss Bingley. “But now, they are only a sign of my own failure. I had a chance, long ago, to better my situation, but now I shall never amount to anything. I shall spend the rest of my life as a burden either to my brother or sister. No one wants me, and why should they? I have nothing to offer.”

“That’s not what I hear,” said Richard.

She furrowed her brow. “What?” She hiccuped.

“I have heard rumors about your dowry,” said Richard, giving her a conspiratorial wink.

“You have?” She turned away. “Oh, but that is even more mortifying. To be so unwanted that your brother must *pay* someone to take you off his hands.”

“Are you so very disagreeable?” said Richard.

“I am,” she said.

“In what way? Why are you so displeasing?” He was teasing her.

But she answered him as if he was serious. “Well, I am a bit too particular about all manner of things. I want things done right, and I can’t bear it when other people don’t have a sense of propriety. I’m afraid that some people can still their tongue when it comes to such matters, but I cannot. I’m afraid I have been too free with my criticism too often. People do not wish to be near me anymore. Charles has spoken to me about it on a number of occasions. Even my sister Louisa has told me the same. And yet, I don’t seem to be able to stop myself.”

“I see.”

“People believe that I think myself better than others, but it is not that way. It is only that some things are right and others are wrong. It is not up to me. I am only trying to get in line with the proper way of the world.”

“That does not seem unreasonable,” he said thoughtfully. He paused. “Have you ever considered that other people are beyond your control?”

She twisted his handkerchief up, turning to him with a furrowed

brow. “I suppose not. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Only that if you are always concerned with other people, you run the risk of being perturbed a good bit of the time, because they are quite outside of your own influence.”

She turned away, appearing to think this over. “I don’t suppose I’ve ever thought of it that way.”

“Would you like to dance?”

She turned to him sharply, eyes wide. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

“I assure you, I am not given to issuing invitations that I have no intention of carrying through with. I mean it.”

“I can’t dance. Look at my face.”

“I have been looking at nothing but your face, Miss Bingley.” He was amused.

“I think I must forgo dancing entirely,” she said. “To dance looking like this, it would be… well, it must not be done.” She sighed. “It is a dreadful shame, because I would so very much like to dance with you. If we should ever find ourselves at another ball, would you ask me again?”

“I would,” he said, smiling. “I definitely would.”

She smiled too. Then, abruptly, she got to her feet. “Oh, heavens! What are we doing? We can’t be out here together in this manner. We are all alone. It is the height of impropriety.” She rushed for the door, and then stopped, holding out his handkerchief to him.

“Keep it,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, how shall I explain the fact I am holding a man’s handkerchief?”

“That would be frightfully improper,” he said, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, it would.”

“You’ll have to hide it,” he said.

Her breath caught in her throat. “Colonel Fitzwilliam! There is only one place I could possibly tuck away a handkerchief.”

“I’m well aware of that,” he said.

“You… you…”

He stepped closer to her. “I might point out that I’m not always the soul of propriety. I might make you dreadfully… unsettled, Miss Bingley.”

She gasped, looking up at him.

He glanced pointedly down at the place where her dress met her skin of her chest, at the barest hints of the swells of her breasts. Then he looked back up at her face. “Will you keep my handkerchief, all the same?”

She swallowed. “You are… I don’t…” She let out a giggle, suddenly, and tucked the fabric down in the front of her bodice, between her

breasts.

Richard's entire body went taut at the sight of it.

"You are horrid, sir," she breathed.

"Apologies," he said, but he didn't sound the least bit sorry, because he wasn't.

She smiled a shy, pleased smile. And then she thrust herself through the door and hurried away from him.

He gazed after her. Oh, he might have made quite a blunder there. What had possessed him to say something so suggestive to a woman like her? It wasn't the least bit proper, and if she told anyone about it he'd likely be forced to marry her.

Well, he thought, *she won't say a word, because it would do more damage to her reputation than mine.*

And yet, this almost made it seem more abominable.

Perhaps his character was black indeed.

Or perhaps he wished to be forced to wed Caroline Bingley. If she were truly as terrible as everyone claimed she was, it would be a fitting punishment for all his sins.

Oddly, however, he hadn't found her terrible at all.

* * *

"I'm sorry, what?" said Elizabeth. "You're a solicitor, you say?"

"Yes," said the man at the door. "I'm sorry to barge in on you in this manner, but I was told it was urgent that you receive word of this. The man who employs me, a Mr. Cumberlain, he is quite insistent that this all be settled soon. It is as much out of a will to do the right thing as to have his sheets balance, I believe."

"I have no notion of what you are speaking of," said Elizabeth.

"You are Mrs. Thistlehill. Mrs. Aaron Thistlehill?"

"Yes, that is me," said Elizabeth.

"Then this is your money," said the solicitor, holding up the sack that he'd brought along. "Mr. Cumberlain only recently discovered that this sum of money had not been claimed by your husband."

"But why would my husband have been owed so much?" said Elizabeth, gaping at the sack.

"It was a gambling debt," said the solicitor.

"A gambling debt," murmured Elizabeth.

"Yes, I understand that your husband went off to war and met with an unfortunate end before he could collect. So, by all rights, it is now yours. Would you just take it? I have other things to see to this morning." He held it out to her. "I've never met a person who was so wary of taking money."

"It's only that I can't even understand how my husband could have afforded to get into a gambling game in which so much was on the line," said Elizabeth.

“Well, perhaps he started with small winnings and worked his way up,” said the solicitor. “Perhaps he was on a winning streak.”

“What is the name of your employer, sir? Chamberlain?”

“Cumberlain.”

“And how long have you been employed by him?”

“Years, madam, and by his father before him as well. What are you implying?”

“Did someone pay you to say that this came from Mr. Cumberlain? I could describe the gentleman I suspect of doing it to you.”

“I am not lying to you,” said the solicitor. “If you don’t want the money, give it away. But I shall say that I have delivered it, and be done with this business.” He tossed the sack of money on the floor and backed away.

Elizabeth watched him go and then she picked it up. It took both of her hands. It was heavy. She did not count it. She knew it must have come from Mr. Darcy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Darcy was astonished when the door to his study opened and his butler entered without permission. The man's face was very red, and he seemed out of sorts.

"Forgive me, sir, for the intrusion," said the butler. "However, I am afraid that we have some kind of situation that demands your attention."

"Oh?" said Darcy, closing the book he had open on his desk. "What sort of situation?"

"A woman has come to call upon you, sir, a woman alone. She does not appear… that is, from her dress, it does not seem that she…" The man sighed. "She will not go away. I have told her that you are not at home, and she insists upon seeing you. I am doing my best to keep her presence from your wife—"

"Did this woman give a name?'

"Thistlehill," said the butler. "Mrs. Thistlehill."

Darcy was on his feet. "Yes, I'll handle this, thank you. Is she at the door?"

"She is, sir."

Darcy gave him a nod and then hurried past him. He rushed down the steps and through the front door, where Elizabeth was standing, holding—with both hands—a very large sack of what might have been money.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I needed to see you," she said. "Since you decline to visit me anymore—"

"Let's walk," he said.

"Yes, I suppose if your wife saw me—"

"She would recognize you," said Darcy. "She knows what you… how I reacted to the news of your death. I would spare her the…" He shook his head. "Let's walk." He moved past her.

"I'm afraid I cannot walk and carry this," she said, thrusting it at him.

"What *is* this?" he said.

"As if you don't know," she said.

He opened it and looked inside. His eyes widened. "Where did you

get this? And are you mad, traveling with so much? You could be accosted. It could all be stolen."

"I'm returning it to you, so I don't suppose that would matter."

"You're *what?*" He was thoroughly confused. But he couldn't keep standing here, discussing this with her, in front of his town house. Anne might look out the window and see them. He seized Elizabeth by the arm and tugged her with them. They made their way along the walk, moving away from his house. "To return this to me implies that it was in my possession in the first place, and I assure you it wasn't."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she said. "A solicitor delivered it to me with some story about my husband and about gambling debts. You didn't have to resort to trickery, sir. My pride is not quite so bad as all that. I would have taken the money from you if you had simply sent it with one of your footmen, especially since you have decided that you are not coming back to me."

"I don't think I quite intended to give you this much," he said. "I've already settled rather a great deal of money on you, haven't I? This seems… excessive." This was Richard's doing, undoubtedly. Richard's guilt in the matter was great indeed to have sent her this much money.

She furrowed her brow at him. "Well, I haven't even counted it."

"Here's what we'll do," he said. "We'll go around the block and come back and I'll give you use of my carriage to convey you home. Then you can count everything that is in there. I think you'll find I'm right about how much it is."

"You're pretending," she said. "You're pretending rather well, and I __"

"I'm not," he said. "I promise you. I know nothing of this. I have no knowledge of where this money must have come from, and I am not responsible for it."

She bit down on her bottom lip. "But then… it couldn't really be…" She stopped walking.

He stopped walking as well. "Perhaps you've simply lucked into a bit of good fortune, madam. One could say you were quite due, couldn't one?"

She was uncertain. "I… I am not sure."

"With what you have saved and this added to it, I think you are quite capable of putting your scheme into place," he said.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I suppose so. But… how can I go about looking for a house or getting myself established? I realize I haven't given much thought to the particulars."

"I'd be happy to provide assistance, if necessary," he said.

"No, you don't wish to see me anymore," she said.

"You know that's not the case," he said. Richard had said to leave

her be and never see her again, and Richard was right, but… well, she had appeared on his doorstep. How could he deny her now? "If we are only dealing with these matters, not having clandestine meetings at night, then it can only be innocent, can it not?"

She drew in a breath. "If you had given me this money with the intention of not seeing me again, I hardly think you would then offer such a thing when I arrived on your doorstep. I suppose I believe you. It must be real. I can hardly fathom it." She held out her hands for the sack of money.

"It's quite heavy, madam. I shall carry it for you," he said. "Let us get you to my carriage. On the walk around the block, we shall discuss arrangements for getting you settled."

She smiled at him, and it was such a smile as he had not seen upon her face in years. She looked a full five years younger, he wagered. It made him feel a pang at what had become of her, a helpless bit of rage at it all. Why could he not make this right? Why could he not somehow make the world as it should be? Why could he not make her smile that way all the time?

* * *

When Mr. Darcy arrived back at the house, Elizabeth safely tucked away in his carriage and bound for home, there was a gentleman disembarking from a carriage nearby. The man gave him an easy smile and hurried to catch up to him.

"Mr. Darcy! I have finally caught you at home at last!"

Darcy squinted at the man. They must be acquainted, but for the life of him, he could not place the other man.

"Of course, if you are busy, perhaps we could set aside another time to speak," said the man. "I have waited quite some time, but if we could make an appointment, it might be no matter. And I do not mind waiting, I must say. The wait is worth it."

Darcy remembered that the man had danced twice with Georgiana at the last ball. He was… "Mr. Graysmith," he said. "You are the brother of Georgiana's school friend, where she was spending the summer."

"Yes, indeed, that's me," said Mr. Graysmith, grinning. "Are you quite busy, or do you suppose we could talk?"

"Do we have something to discuss?" said Mr. Darcy.

"We do, indeed."

"And that would be?"

"Your sister, sir,' said Mr. Graysmith, laughing now.

Darcy was rather thoroughly confused. "What about her?"

"May I come in, Mr. Darcy?" Mr. Graysmith was still laughing. "I should prefer to do this more properly."

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Darcy. "I am not busy."

He opened the door for Graysmith, and Georgiana was standing in the doorway to the foyer. She must have seen the carriage pull up from the window and come down in anticipation of the arrival of Mr. Graysmith. “Oh, Fitz, you cannot put him off this time,” she said.

“Put him off,” Darcy repeated, bewildered. He told a servant to bring refreshment to the sitting room on the first floor and then led the way there.

Inside the room, he could not settle himself in a seat and instead took up a stance next to the mantle, arms clasped behind his back. He surveyed Mr. Graysmith, who did not sit either.

“I’m sure your sister has spoken of me,” said Mr. Graysmith. “I met her quite some time ago, when she and I were both younger, but this summer, I suppose I saw her in a different light. I put off my business in London ever so many times simply to stay at home, in her presence, and then when it could not be put off any longer, it all became clear to me. I could not be parted from her.”

“You wish to marry my sister,” said Darcy, understanding dawning upon him.

“Yes, did she not ever mention me to you?”

“I don’t…” Darcy cleared his throat. “So, all the time she’s been here, then, you’ve wished this?”

“Well, I asked her before I departed, and she accepted me,” said Mr. Graysmith. “She indicated that you were in London, so it seemed as though I might gain your blessing and then we might move forward toward this union between the two of us.”

Darcy let out a laugh. “And you have called before?”

“You are very rarely at home, sir,” said Mr. Graysmith, shrugging. He was smiling, however. He wasn’t affronted, though he must know from Georgiana that Darcy had been at home all the time. It was a standard excuse given by servants to say that one wasn’t at home when one was, anyway, Darcy supposed.

“I must apologize,” said Mr. Darcy. “Of course, I know your family is quite respectable, and if this is what Georgiana wants, then I would not stand in your way.”

Mr. Graysmith brightened visibly. “Well, excellent, then. I must confess I had not realized that I was so anxious about such a thing. It is only that you have denied my presence so often that I had thought perhaps—”

“I have been preoccupied,” said Darcy. “It has nothing to do with you, I am sure.”

The door opened and a servant came in with a tray.

“Georgiana, I can see you,” said Darcy. “You may as well come in.”

Georgiana appeared inside the doorway.

“You might have told me,” said Darcy. “If you had accepted an offer

of marriage, I should think you would have informed me."

"I did!" Georgiana was incensed. "It's not my fault that you're deaf."

Darcy blinked. Preoccupied, indeed. Well, that would all be over soon. Elizabeth would be settled in her new life, and she would make contact with her family. He would no longer have her at the forefront of his thoughts.

* * *

Richard wouldn't have typically whiled away a summer afternoon in the heat at Hyde Park, but he was sensible to the fact that he would be called back to his duties in the army rather soon, and he wished to enjoy what leisure time he could. He was surprised to see that Miss Bingley was there, along with her brother. Of course, perhaps he oughtn't have been surprised. He knew that Miss Bingley's brother was desperate to foist his sister off on some man, and perhaps he was hoping that the sight of her golden hair and slim figure would be an enticement when coupled with the news of her dowry.

Richard was approaching her before he had quite made up his mind to do so. He still was not aware if his fascination with Miss Bingley was borne of some perverse desire to punish himself or out of a strange affection that he could not understand. Before he could even think through the implications of either, she had noticed him.

Her eyes widened, and she blushed.

This made him smile, and he moved all the more quickly.

Mr. Bingley touched the brim of his hat. "Colonel Fitzwilliam, how good to see you."

"Mr. Bingley," greeted Richard. He turned to Caroline. "Miss Bingley. You're looking quite pretty this afternoon."

Mr. Bingley turned to Richard sharply.

Richard lifted his chin.

Mr. Bingley gave him an assessing look and then cleared his throat. "You, er, perhaps you would like to take to the walkway with the colonel, Caroline. It is a lovely day for a walk."

"It is not," said Miss Bingley. "It is stifling and far too hot."

"So, you will not walk with me?" Richard offered her his arm.

"I did not say that," she said. "Of course, I would not mind to take a bit of exercise, and you are most kind to offer, sir." She glanced at her brother. "Even if you did not exactly offer *yourself*." She said this pointedly.

"It was my intention when I approached," said Richard.

"Was it, truly?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Surely you don't doubt that I bear admiration for you, madam," said Richard. "Your brother, I assure you, could not entice me to do anything I did not wish to do myself."

“Nothing that I said indicated such a thing.” Miss Bingley drew herself up haughtily. “I know not why you would say so.”

“Of course not,” Richard said. “I plucked the idea from thin air, did I not?” He was very amused. “Shall we walk, or no?”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t chase him off, Caroline,” said Bingley tightly.

Miss Bingley blushed again, clearly embarrassed. Abruptly, she took Richard’s arm. “Let us be off, then, sir. My brother is obviously weary of my company.”

Richard couldn’t help but laugh softly as they walked off.

“You are laughing at me.” Miss Bingley was mortified.

“No,” said Richard, which only meant that he laughed harder.

“I don’t see why you came near me at all,” she said.

“Don’t you?” said Richard. “Perhaps you don’t know this, but I make it my business to become well acquainted with all of the eligible heiresses in my circle of acquaintances. News of your dowry has traveled far and wide, and I felt our conversation at the Beaumont ball was so promising that nothing could keep me away from you.”

“So, it’s about my dowry.”

“Yes, entirely,” he said.

She sniffed. “You would find me tolerable only if that amount of money was involved I suppose.”

“Tolerable, madam? Do you always speak thus about yourself?”

“You mustn’t think I don’t know what the Darcy family thinks of me,” said Miss Bingley. “Perhaps for some time I was unaware, but then I saw what became of Mr. Darcy when that Bennet girl died. And my own brother married her sister, against all sense. I would have pieced it together myself if Charles had not told me himself, in no uncertain terms, what it was that Mr. Darcy truly thought of me.” This hurt her to admit. He could hear it in her voice.

“Yes, Darcy is quite often unappreciative of what falls at his feet,” said Richard. “And a great many things fall at his feet, not that he has any notion of how it is for the rest of us.”

She turned to look at him, searching his expression. Clearly she did not know quite what to make of his having said such a thing. “I still have your handkerchief,” she said suddenly, but her voice was quieter and more shy. She smiled at him, but she looked away, fluttering her eyelashes, ducking down her head.

“Good,” he said, and he smiled, too.

* * *

In the end, Mr. Darcy ended up being much more involved in procuring Elizabeth’s new house than she had ever intended. But she found that there was so much of the process that she did not understand, having never undertaken it before. Furthermore, as a

woman, even as a widow, there was much of the process that was not easy for her to navigate. Having Mr. Darcy involved was quite a bit of assistance, and she appreciated it.

They did not meet at night, and they were never alone. They used a ruse that he was her brother-in-law and that she was helping her since her husband—his brother—had died. They did not deal with anyone who might have recognized Mr. Darcy, since this circle of London was below his usual association.

Her new house was much more spacious than the other one, and she engaged the services of a maid of all work. She was loathe to incur the expense, but she knew that it would only be suspicious if she did not. She had to rise back to the station from which she had fallen, and she did not know how she would quite manage it.

Being near Mr. Darcy had reminded her of much, but it had truly been such a long time since she had been the Elizabeth Bennet that she used to be. So much of it seemed foreign to her now.

Soon enough, it was done, however, and then there was no more reason to see Mr. Darcy. Indeed, now, she must contact her family. Now, she must move forward.

It should have been easy. She had been composing, in her head, the letter that she would send to her family for years now, and she knew exactly what it should say. But for some reason, when it came to writing it out, the words didn't flow.

She found herself spending all morning writing drafts and then starting over, trying to reword the sentences or to tell the story in some other order.

She needed to convey that she had just remembered them, that she had forgotten them for some time, and that now she remembered all, and that she was all right. Then, they would send for her, and she would travel to Hertfordshire and see…

She tried to imagine it, seeing her dear papa after all this time. Seeing Jane—sweet, darling, wonderful Jane. Somehow, she couldn't.

What if it went wrong? What if they didn't believe her? What if…?

Oh, perhaps sending a letter was the wrong approach. Perhaps she should instead simply go to them and arrive on the doorstep of Longbourn. Surely that would be what she would do if she had really spontaneously remembered her family, wouldn't it? She would have no worry that they would reject her, so she would go to them immediately.

Days passed.

She stopped trying to write the letters and instead spent her mornings reading books from a library that had been stocked by donations from Mr. Darcy in addition to her own purchases. She wanted only to escape for some reason.

This was what she had wanted for so long, and now that she had it, it overwhelmed her.

She supposed that the problem was simply that this had been her hope for too long. It was what had kept her going. But now, if she put it into place, there was a chance it would not work, and then she would be destroyed. She was terrified, and she was unable to move forward.

One night, there was a knock at the door, and Elizabeth answered it herself, for she had dismissed the maid for the day. The woman was married and lived elsewhere with her husband, not under Elizabeth's own roof.

It was Mr. Darcy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I shouldn't be here," Darcy said to her when she opened the door. Not, "Good evening." Not, "I hope you're in good health." Not, "Ever so good to see you, madam." He greeted her with denials of his actions. He was ashamed of himself, and yet he seemed to be beyond any control of himself.

He had attempted to stay away, but he was not capable of it.

His house was aflutter with preparations for his sister's wedding. Anne was caught up in it, as well. No one noticed that he was withdrawn and quieter than usual. Perhaps he had been thus for so long that they couldn't notice. But all he thought of was Elizabeth.

He had not intended to take the carriage to visit her, but rather to simply go for a drive at night, to gather his thoughts. But he'd ended up here. He'd thought, "I shall simply sit here and peer at her house and then move on." But he'd gotten out of the carriage and walked to the door. Then he'd knocked. He felt as if his body had done all these things without his own volition. He felt lost.

"Come in," she said, smiling at him, moving away from the door.

He stepped inside. "Have you heard from your family yet?"

"I have not written yet," she said.

"Oh," he said.

"I am going to," she insisted. Rather forcefully, he thought. "It is more difficult than I thought it would be, that is all."

He nodded. "Yes, I can see how it would be." Even though he was not sure that he truly could understand why it was difficult. However, he was glad that she hadn't contacted her family. Then he could still visit her without it damaging her reputation. No one knew about her. It meant she was still his secret, almost as though she belonged to him in some way.

She could never truly belong to him, even though he wished that she could, but this was somehow gratifying.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said.

"I know," he said. "I am sorry to have come."

"I'm not sorry you're here," she said. "Shall we sit down together? We could talk of books. I have been reading some of the ones you contributed to my library."

"Have you?" He smiled. "I have been missing your company, I must say. Just being near you, it soothes me in a way I can't quite explain."

"It also soothes me."

They gazed at each other for a few minutes, and he knew the gaze was wrong. He knew the gaze itself violated his vows in some unspeakable way. But perhaps he didn't care.

They went into her sitting room, and they began to talk, and it was easy and comfortable. He was pleased, and he felt at ease. The soothing, it was powerful, as if it spoke to his very soul. He did not know why fate had chosen to torment them both in this way. It was quite obvious that they were meant to be together. Unfortunately, there seemed to be no path forward for that to happen. Even so, losing her entirely…

Well, it had already happened once, and it had nearly destroyed him. He was not certain that he would survive losing her a second time.

* * *

London
September, 1815

Darcy groaned, flinging his bare arm over his face. The sun was shining in through the window. It was morning.

Anne was across the room, wearing only an open, sheer chemise. The sun illuminated her body from behind, and he could see every dip and curve of her form. Her hair was down, hanging down her back in disarray, and he squinted at the sight of her, groaning louder.

"It is morning, husband," said Anne.

"What time is it?" he said, groaning again.

She laughed. "Nearly 8:00, of course."

"Why are we moving around at this ungodly hour?" he said. "Why are you out of bed? Come back to bed." He woke up in her chambers most mornings, but she had usually vacated the bed by then and he was alone. She woke before him, because she went to bed at a normal time, and he came in much later, crawling between the sheets next to her in the dark hours after midnight. She would wake to his kisses, throwing her arms around his neck, uttering throaty giggles and squirming against him eagerly.

Then, in the morning, he would wake up, and she would be gone, and he would think to himself again that this madness must end, but by the time evening came, he was lacking any will or self-control. He would go to Elizabeth again.

He hadn't touched her since that one abominable kiss.

No, they were the picture of propriety, even if he was visiting her at a scandalous hour. They talked of innocent subjects, and they never

even went close to each other. Sometimes, perhaps, the words died in his throat, or sometimes in hers, and then they would simply sit on either side of the room, gazing upon the other, drinking the other in. But otherwise, nothing happened.

And yet, he came home agitated and unsettled, and there was never anything for it but to come to Anne.

"I thought we could have breakfast together for once," said Anne, coming obligingly back towards the bed.

"I can think of things I'd like to be doing with my mouth that aren't breakfast," he said in a gruff voice, rather surprised with himself to be uttering things such as that in the light of day. The things that happened in this room almost seemed to him as if they were part of some waking dream. He had neatly compartmentalized his life into various aspects, and now, the sun and his wife… it was all bleeding together.

She gave him a wicked grin and crawled onto the bed, coming for him. "Well, that does sound tempting, Fitzwilliam."

He reached for her, and then she was in his arms, and she was tiny and warm and laughing, like a frothing brook, and he rolled over, pinning her underneath him as her laughter turned to gasps.

They didn't make it to breakfast for some time.

When they did, the dining room was bathed in morning light, the sun having moved to the point in the sky to hit the windows just right. Everything was bright and glowing and the silver chocolate pot gleamed like the sun on the sideboard.

Georgiana was already there, drinking chocolate and perusing some gossip rag that had been delivered that morning. "Fitz, imagine seeing you out of bed so early," she greeted.

"I dragged him up," said Anne, whose fingers were entwined with his as she pulled him along behind her.

Darcy wasn't sure how that had happened, how they'd come down the stairs holding hands. He felt vaguely ashamed of it, but he also felt as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Why shouldn't he be happy with his wife? Why shouldn't he be affectionate with her? Why shouldn't he be falling for her, indeed?

The answer was that it didn't make sense, of course. How could he be falling for Anne when he was in love with Elizabeth? Such a thing couldn't be possible, could it?

He also knew that it was tainted in any case. He came to Anne's bed not precisely because of her, but because she was a substitute for whatever frustration he felt when he was with Elizabeth. If he was falling for Anne, it was a fraud in some way. It couldn't truly be real.

And yet…

The morning sun and her palm against his, and the way his sister

looked on approvingly… it was a good feeling.

He switched directions, pulling Anne towards the table. “Sit down, wife. I shall serve you this morning.”

“Oh?” said Anne, delighted.

“Chocolate or tea?” said Darcy, giving her a small bow.

“Tea, of course,” said Anne. “How is it you do not know this about me?”

“I am horrified at my *faux pas*,” said Darcy. “I swear never to make the mistake again.”

Anne laughed, and he laughed too.

He went to the sideboard to layer her plate with food, and he was not sure how this continued, but why must it be so miserable? Weren’t both the women happy? Wasn’t he happy? Why must he feel any guilt at all?

So, it wasn’t perfect, but was perfection even possible?

He set the plate in front of Anne, and she beamed at him. “Why, thank you so much, husband.”

He gave her another small bow. “But of course.”

* * *

As the summer grew close to an end, Richard knew that his time in town was short. He would be called back to his duties with the army soon enough, and though he did not expect his labors to be dangerous or fraught with fighting, he would be occupied in a manner less pleasant than when his time was all his own.

So, he urged everyone in his acquaintance to attend a ball at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Young, even though the ball took place nearly a forty-minute drive from town, outside in the gardens of the hosts’ house. A great wooden floor had been built upon the ground for dancing, and the rest of the guests milled about in the surrounding area. The air was the perfect temperature for such a gathering—the heat of the day having cooled into something sublime.

Both of his female cousins had been easily persuaded to attend the ball. It was only Darcy who had offered any resistance. However, it was a token resistance that gave way when his wife and sister put pressure upon him, and he agreed then with a careless smile for Anne that she returned with a twinkle in her eye.

Richard was glad to see it, because it was obvious from their interactions that things were different between them than they had been. He could see the real affection that had grown between the couple, and he was pleased about it.

He did not question Darcy’s resistance, then, until later, when he was talking to Anne during a dance. The two were whirling past the many lanterns that hung from the nearby trees, lighting up the area with an array of glowing and flickering lights, and he was

commenting upon his observations.

"When last we met at a ball, you seemed rather out of sorts regarding your husband," he said. "I see that things are mended between you."

"Yes," she said. "I think so. Of course, he is still so very occupied with that gentleman's club of his. He goes there every evening, but he seems different otherwise. He and I are closer, and he is involved in Georgiana's wedding plans. He is not only responding with grunts from within his locked study anymore, at least." She laughed.

Richard was alarmed by this response, however. "Still attending the gentleman's club, you say?"

"Oh, yes," said Anne. "Do you attend with him? Georgiana said that you were the one who had introduced him to the place."

"No, I don't go myself," said Richard. "If I did, I would know where he spent his evenings, wouldn't I?" He sighed heavily. He was not pleased. He had kept some tabs on Miss Bennet, enough to know that she had set herself up in a house in a better part of town and that she had taken the money he had paid that solicitor to take to her. He had hoped that this meant that the matter was entirely settled. But it didn't seem so, unfortunately.

After ending the dance with Anne, he wished to find Darcy and speak to him about it.

Darcy, however, took Richard's place dancing with Anne and would be engaged for the better of part of a half an hour in that, so Richard determined to wait and speak to him later.

Richard then caught sight of Miss Bingley, who he hadn't even known would be in attendance at the ball. She must have come with her sister Mrs. Hurst, who he now also spotted, dancing with her husband. Richard did not see Mr. Bingley anywhere in attendance. Miss Bingley was by herself on the edge of the crowd, and he went for her straightaway.

He still wasn't sure what he was about when it came to this woman, but from his own interactions with her, he felt that her relative badness seemed to have been largely exaggerated. Or perhaps she had mellowed with age, as people were wont to do. Perhaps her pride had been dinged enough times that she had begun to change.

It was an odd thing, he knew. No one wanted to feel pain, but often going through difficult times helped to forge one's personality into something better than if one had never gone through any suffering at all.

"Ah," she said when he approached, "it is you, colonel, the man who is at least honest about the reason he is pursuing me."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Miss Bingley." He took her gloved hand and brought it to his lips. "How are you this

evening?"

"Tired of listening to men speak about all manner of banal things," she said. "I am instructed by my brother not to chase anyone away, but I must say that the conversational ability of my last two dance partners left rather much to be desired. I also suspect that both of them wanted me only because they thought that my dowry would be just the thing to help out with their gambling debts."

"Oh?" he said. "Of whom do you speak?"

"Mr. Steele."

"He is quite the gambler, but he is not always a terrible conversationalist," said the colonel.

"Well, yes, I suppose he was tolerable," she decided. "And Mr. Bolton."

"Ah," said Richard. "His debts are even worse. My sympathies, Miss Bingley."

"I appreciate your honesty in the matter," she said. "You have been quite open about the fact that you are only after money."

"I wouldn't say I'm only after money," he said. "But I must admit that it has always been a consideration when choosing my future bride."

"And I have enough for you or you wouldn't be asking me to tuck handkerchiefs into my bodice?"

"That may have been a bit presumptuous of me, madam. I do apologize for my forwardness."

"Because you do not truly wish to court me, only to flirt dangerously with me?"

"I believe I've made my intentions quite clear, madam."

She glanced at him. "Yes, I thought so as well, but I wished to be very sure."

"I *am* courting you, I think," he said.

She nodded. "Well, then, I know I am in no position to make demands, but I thought that perhaps I would ask a few questions, and if you gave an answer I could not abide, it would save us both the trouble of further association."

He smirked. "How expedient of you."

"I thought so," she said.

"What sort of questions do you wish to put to me?"

"Why is it that you are looking for a wife, Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"Aren't all men looking for wives, or wouldn't the mature women of society have us believe so?"

"Perhaps," she said. "But you have not shown any special interest in settling down hitherto. What has brought this on?"

"Have you not heard, madam? The war is over."

"But surely, you were not putting off matrimony due to the status of

fighting."

"Why not? What man would delight in leaving behind a widow and half-orphaned children?"

"Well, any man can die unexpectedly."

"But soldiers do die so much more readily."

"You would not wish to leave behind a legacy?"

"What legacy? I have no lands or titles, in case that has escaped your notice."

"So, you had not seriously considered marrying until the war was ended. And if it had never ended? You would have never married?"

"I did not say that," he said. "It is not something I have given a great deal of extensive thought towards, I'm afraid. I had no precise plan for seeking a wife."

"But from what I understand, you do not pursue women. Certainly, no one can remember your ever before seeking out a woman at Hyde Park."

He smirked. "Now, that cannot be true. I must have done so before."

She turned and gave him a wide smile. "See, this is why I like you. No false flattery from you, sir. Other men might give me a pretty speech about being carried away by my beauty—"

"You *are* a beautiful woman," he said.

This seemed to make the words die in her throat. She gazed at him, speechless.

"I would be remiss if I did account for that in why I have been keeping company with you," he said. "But I could hardly call it pursuit."

"Oh, indeed," she said archly. "Forgive me."

"Do not be offended by such a thing," he said. "I have not ruled out the idea of pursuing you."

"Oh, well, that is most flattering, sir." She arched an eyebrow.

He chuckled, looking down at his shoes. "The reason I do not pursue women may be that I am not very skilled at it."

"You may be selling yourself short, Colonel," she said. "At any rate, I have heard that there is another avenue by which you do pursue women, and you don't seem stymied in that area."

He turned to her sharply, no longer amused. "What do you mean?"

"There is talk of you, Colonel Fitzwilliam. You would not be quite termed a rake, I don't suppose, as your attentions rarely seem to fall amongst women of noble birth, but you have a reputation. You must be aware of such things."

He didn't say anything.

"As of late, I have been told that you have not been up to your typical activities, and I have to wonder if you have settled with some

secret mistress. Do you wish to use my dowry to keep her?"

"What?" He was flummoxed. "*This* is what you think of me?"

"You, Colonel Fitzwilliam, have no reason to pay me any mind," she said. "And yet, you flirt with me in a way that no man has flirted with me, perhaps ever, but quite definitely since I was very young. I cannot help but be suspicious, I'm afraid."

He turned away from her, shifting on his feet. "I do not have a mistress."

"You would say that regardless."

"I do not have the means to keep one, as you've astutely pointed out," he said. "And further, I find I am done with the entire business. I have thought it through, and I find it distasteful."

It was her turn to smirk.

"Yes, I may have been foolish and determined not to notice before, but it has become clear to me that it is abominable. Most of the women who are forced into such positions are there because of misfortune. They have no other means to take care of themselves, and they must rely on keeping the attentions of men to do so. I feel as though, in that position, the women are not truly making a choice, that they are victims. I can no longer participate in such a thing."

"I see," said Miss Bingley.

"This is not something I truly wish to discuss with you," he said in a low voice. "However, madam, you did bring the subject up."

"I think it is not so much different for women in any case," she said. "I am no longer welcome in my brother's house, and I must catch the attention of some man so that he will take me off my brother's hands. I also have no means to take care of myself."

He shook his head at her. "It is not the same. Marriage is not the same."

"No, in my case, I would be coming with money to pay for my keep, so you need not support me," she said acerbically.

He hung his head. "Miss Bingley, I admit that there is a merit in what you say. But as a wife, you are respected. You have a place in society. You are assured of support for your children. It is not the same."

"Perhaps not," she said. "But it is similar." She squared her shoulders. "Well, I must say that I do find your answers to my questions acceptable. If you wish to keep up your suit after all of this, I shall allow it."

He smiled again. "Allow me to express my deepest gratitude for that, madam."

"You promised you would ask me to dance if we came to another ball," she said idly.

"So, I did," he said. "Is the next set on your dance card spoken for?"

“As a matter of fact, it is,” she said. “But if you wish to claim the next set, I should be most agreeable.”

“I do,” he said.

The matter settled, he tried to turn their talk to other subjects, less weighty, for he found her to be more serious a woman than he had been led to believe. He wanted to see if there was anything lighter within her, and he set about trying to engage her opinion on a vast variety of things, but he only found her exacting and sober about it all. Some of the decorations at the ball she found favor with, others she decried. It was the same with the drinks offered and the music playing. She had a very exacting idea in her head about how all should be conducted, and she could be cutting when it did not meet with her standards.

Richard found it all rather ironic that Darcy should have found fault with her. In many ways, they were kindred spirits. Perhaps, though, Darcy had not enjoyed peering into the mirror of his own personality. Very often, Richard had found, people tended to dislike things in others that were also their own faults.

Before long, it was time for a new dance, and Major Irving came to collect Miss Bingley, which Richard found he was not pleased with. He did not know Irving well, but he knew that Irving was only free because his wife had died in childbirth a year before. Irving had gotten that wife in a sordid scandal that had been the talk of town for some time. If Richard remembered correctly, he had heard that Irving had forced his attentions on the unwilling woman and that he had only married her after being cajoled into it and offered a certain amount of money.

Irving was certainly only interested in Miss Bingley’s dowry as well. Richard supposed he shouldn’t be too hard on the man when he was similarly motivated, but he didn’t like Irving, and he didn’t like Miss Bingley considering him.

He was possessive of her, he supposed, which made no sense.

What would it be like to be married to her? Would she find fault with the breakfast table every day? He shook his head, chuckling under his breath. At least she would be unlikely to embarrass him with his family. Miss Bingley seemed to take propriety very seriously.

Upon thinking of his family, he immediately caught sight of Darcy and remembered that he had wished to speak to him. He made for the other man straightaway and caught him by the arm. “May I steal you away from your lovely wife for just a moment, Darcy?”

Darcy, who had been speaking with Anne, turned to him in surprise. “Richard! Where have you been?”

“A moment, if you please,” said Richard. “I would discuss something with you in private.” He smiled at Anne. “I shall have him

back to you soon enough, madam, I promise."

"See that you do," said Anne, smiling at them both.

Richard tugged on Darcy's arm.

"What is this about?" said Darcy, pulling his arm back.

Richard nodded towards the hedgerows. "Let's go talk away from anyone who might overhear."

"All right," said Darcy, furrowing his brow. He followed him, however.

When they were far enough from everyone that they could not be overheard, Richard spoke again, quietly. "You said you were done with her."

Darcy's head snapped up. "That's what you wish to speak to me about?"

"I have word she took the money and set herself up in her new house. I have been wondering why I have not heard any word about her family rejoicing at their daughter returned to them. And now I find that it's because you are keeping her from it."

"I am not," said Darcy. "I promise you, I would not stop her from reuniting with her loved ones."

"You have not given her up. I have word that you go to your 'gentleman's club' every night."

"It is not… I visit her, yes, but we only talk."

"Darcy." Richard sighed.

"I hardly think this is your business," said Darcy. "I am not preoccupied anymore. She is not all I think about. I am making sure to be involved with the preparations for Georgiana's wedding, and I am attentive to my wife. Everything is fine."

Richard regarded him. "Is it truly?"

"Yes," said Darcy.

Richard drew in a breath, surveying him.

"I also do not think you have any right to berate me for my actions," said Darcy.

"Do you think it can go on this way forever?" said Richard.

Darcy looked down at his feet. He was quiet.

"Eventually, she must rejoin her family," said Richard. "Then what?"

"I don't know," said Darcy. "But I shall find some way to reacquaint myself with her, I suppose. Some respectable way."

Richard snorted.

"I can't bear to lose her," said Darcy quietly. "Not again. I don't suppose you'd understand it."

"Maybe you should take her to bed after all," Richard muttered. "Maybe that is what is making her so fascinating. Maybe if—"

"Oh, yes, well, I suppose you could recommend her to me,

considering you've had your taste." Darcy's mouth twisted.

"You'll never forgive me for that, will you?" Richard sighed. "I shall never forgive myself either."

Darcy's shoulders sagged. "No, I must repent of my sharpness. In truth, if you had not been so close to her, you might never have recognized her. Even now, I should still think she was dead. So, I do forgive you. Let us never speak of it again."

Richard nodded once, curtly. "Agreed."

"It is not perfect, Richard, but it is what it is," said Darcy. "If I had only not gotten married. If I had only…" He spread his hands. "But I cannot alter what is. I am doing my best, but I see no reason for everyone to suffer even more than we already do. Thank you for what you did, for the money you settled upon her. But let this be now. Let me deal with my own affairs in my own way."

Richard sighed again. He looked out over the dance floor, and he suddenly realized—alarm blooming in his gut—that he did not see Miss Bingley or Major Irving. His gaze sought them elsewhere amongst the surrounding area, but he did not see them with any of the other figures standing and conversing in the lawn.

"Is that an agreement?" said Darcy.

"Forgive me," said Richard. "But I need to go looking for Miss Bingley."

"What?" said Darcy, letting out a disbelieving laugh. "You cannot be serious."

"She was dancing with Major Irving, and now they've both disappeared," said Richard.

"Irving," said Darcy. "Now, that's a chap she deserves."

"Oh, don't say that," said Richard. "What has she really ever done to you besides try to mend your pens and compliment you, hmm? The woman adored you, and you shrugged her off like a discarded coat."

"Are you defending Miss Bingley?" said Darcy. "Have you ever tried to have a conversation with her?"

"I have had quite a few recently," said Richard. "Is it possible that she's changed? Have you thought that?"

"You have formed a connection to Miss Bingley, of all people," said Darcy. "Oh, if Georgiana gets wind of this, she will be furious. Imagine, you married to Caroline Bingley, and all of us forced to put up with her at every family gathering from now until eternity."

"If I don't find her, she'll be trapped by Irving, no doubt," said Richard. "Excuse me." He took off, moving amongst the hedgerows, leaving Darcy behind.

"Richard!" Darcy called after him.

Richard ignored him. He moved more quickly, picking up the pace as he searched down one row and then the other.

But he didn't see her anywhere.

Then he rounded a corner, and a flash of movement was coming up the rows. It was a woman running. Was it Miss Bingley?

It was.

Her hair had come half free of whatever bound it up, and it flew behind her in golden wisps. Her dress was torn.

He intercepted her, reaching out for her.

She recognized him and came to a stop, hand to her chest as she panted. "Oh, Colonel Fitzwilliam. It's you. I thought it was Major Irving."

"Where is he?" said Richard, looking around her.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm afraid I hit him."

"Why did you go away with him? Why did you leave the dance floor?" He was angry.

"You speak as if it were a choice, sir," she said. "He danced us right off the floor, and then I tried to struggle, and he was too strong for me. He said that once he was done with me, my brother would pay even more than my dowry to get him to marry me and save my reputation, and then he… he kissed me, but it was horrid and very wet and his teeth…" She shuddered.

"Lord," said Richard, stripping his jacket off and draping it around her to cover her torn dress. "This is abominable. You come with me, and don't worry a bit about anything that man said."

She huddled into the jacket, shivering even though it wasn't cold. "Well, that's when I hit him."

Richard put his hand on her back and walked her through the hedgerow. "It is dark here, and we shall dart this way, towards the carriages. I shall send my driver to look for your brother—oh, he isn't here, is he? Your sister, then."

"Thank you," said Miss Bingley, looking up at him gratefully. "Thank goodness I found you before he found me, sir."

But as they emerged from the end of the hedgerow, Major Irving emerged as well. He looked them over and he reached for Miss Bingley.

"Stop that," said Richard.

"No one invited you, Fitzwilliam," said Irving. He yanked on Miss Bingley, dislodging Richard's jacket, and then pulled her against him. He kissed her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Miss Bingley struggled.

Richard thrust a hand between them and pushed on Major Irving's chest. The major went sprawling on the ground.

Richard turned to Miss Bingley. "Are you all right?"

Irving was up, coming for Richard, hands clenched in fists. He swung.

Richard sidestepped.

Irving swung again.

His fist collided, and Richard's head rang with pain. He lunged at the other man, swinging his own fists, punching Irving in the jaw and in the stomach.

And then others were there, and they were surrounded. Darcy was pulling him away from the other man, hissing unintelligible words into his ear, and Richard was looking everywhere for Miss Bingley.

Finally, he spotted her, in her torn dress, her eyes wide and frightened.

Richard shook Darcy off to scoop his jacket from the ground and cover her again.

She tugged the jacket tight over her skin, standing close to him.

They were surrounded by people, and everyone was talking. The cacophony had drowned out the music—or perhaps the musicians had stopped playing and come to see what was going on. Richard couldn't be sure.

Richard wished he could shield her from all this. His head ached. He touched his cheekbone gingerly.

"What's all this?" rang out Mr. Hurst's voice, and everyone quieted to look at him.

Miss Bingley's face colored. She ducked her head down. Richard wanted to put his arm around her and pull her close, but it wouldn't be proper in the midst of all this with everyone looking on.

"Irving, up to his old tricks?" called someone.

"Indeed not," said Irving hotly. "It is not *my* jacket she's wearing."

Everyone turned to look at Richard.

Who straightened and decided he didn't care. He put his arm around Miss Bingley. She pressed into him, and her body was small

and warm and soft, and it seemed to fit against him perfectly.

"Miss Bingley's been through an ordeal," said Richard to Mr. Hurst. "I think it would be wise to get your sister-in-law home."

"Yes," said Mr. Hurst, eyeing him. "You are quite likely right, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"I'll escort her to your carriage," said Richard. He looked down at Miss Bingley. She swallowed, peering up at him.

Together, they walked away from the others, moving away from the lights and the crowd.

They walked in silence for some time.

However, as they approached the carriage, she began to speak. "What was he thinking?" she said.

"Who?" said Richard softly.

"The major," she said. "Why did he try to take me from you? Why did he then try to blame it all on you?"

"Likely he wasn't thinking it through," said Richard. "Likely, he thought to weasel out when he thought the crowd would condemn him."

"Now, see here," spoke up Mr. Hurst from behind them. "I have no idea what has just occurred, but Caroline, you must realize that this isn't good for you, or for any of us. And you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, what is your part in this? What have you done with my sister-in-law?"

"He saved me," said Miss Bingley. "Major Irving was a beast to me, and Colonel Fitzwilliam was my rescuer."

They had reached the carriage. Richard wasn't sure that he wanted to let go of her, but he did.

She started to take off his jacket.

"No, keep that as well," said Richard.

"As well?" said Mr. Hurst.

Miss Bingley huddled back inside the fabric, and he liked the thought of her in his clothes. He eyed her.

"You know what people are going to be saying," said Mr. Hurst to Richard.

"I'll marry her," said Richard.

Miss Bingley uttered a funny little gasp.

"If she'll have me," said Richard, turning to her, raising his eyebrows.

"It hardly seems fair," said Miss Bingley, her voice strangled. "You shouldn't feel forced—"

"As it happens, I don't," said Richard. "This was where we were headed anyway, don't you think, Miss Bingley?"

Her lips parted.

"I shall call on you tomorrow?" said Richard.

"A-all right," she said.

“Will you be at your sister’s house?” he said. “Ought I visit your brother first?”

“No, I shall go to Charles now directly,” said Miss Bingley. “I am staying there. I had only accompanied my sister and brother to this ball.” She looked around. “Where *is* Louisa?”

“Here,” said Mrs. Hurst, who was hurrying toward them. “Caroline, what happened? What is this business? I didn’t see anything, and it was all broken up by the time I got there. What are you wearing? Is that a man’s jacket?” Mrs. Hurst looked over Richard’s shirtsleeves with a sniff and then took both of her sister’s hands in her own.

“At your brother’s, then,” said Richard.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, all right.”

“Come into the carriage now,” said Mrs. Hurst. “We must get you home, Caroline, this instant.”

* * *

Elizabeth entered her sitting room, where Colonel Fitzwilliam was already there, standing. He had been shown there by her maid.

“It’s quite early for visitors, sir,” she said. “I’m afraid I have nothing to offer you in the way of refreshment.”

“I have a full day today,” said the colonel. “I thought I must see you first thing, however.”

“Yes, and why lean on any propriety when it comes to me? After all, we have become rather well acquainted.” She said the last pointedly, and she sat down, smoothing her skirts.

He sat, too. “Do you wish to speak of that?”

“I don’t see what there is to say,” she said.

“Only that you think I do not respect you,” he said. “Is that not what you’re implying?”

“I did not say that.”

“Well, that is not true. If I had known who you were, I would never have engaged you thus, and now that I have experienced it all, I have decided that I will never engage any woman thus. But even before, when I was not of such scruples, the fact that you were Elizabeth Bennet meant that I bore you great respect. I am truly sorry if my early visit inconveniences you. I knew, however, that my cousin had not been to see you last night, because I was in his company. So, I did not think you would have been kept up late.”

She lifted her chin. “If you think that Mr. Darcy and I are involved, I must assure you—”

“No, I think that thus far, he has kept his vow not to touch you.”

She felt color rise unbidden to her face, thinking of the time he kissed her. Would the colonel see it?

“But you must realize that won’t last forever. Mr. Darcy is one of the most restrained men I have ever met, but he is still a man, and he

wants you."

She flinched.

"I'm sorry to be so blunt," said the colonel. "But I think it is true, and what is more, it is obvious you want him back."

"He comes only to talk," she said.

"Yes, well, talking for hours upon hours every evening is an attachment, madam," said the colonel. "Do you deny you are attached to him?"

"I don't know what you want me to say," she said.

"I think you have been through enough in your life," said the colonel. "I played my own part in that. I think you have the chance to reclaim your respectability, and more importantly, to rekindle your relationships with the people you love. And I would hate to see you throw that away because Mr. Darcy got you with child, which *will* happen if this continues, and we both know it's true."

"No," she said, her voice choked. "I would never allow him to—"

"You would," said the colonel.

"No, I—"

"I can't say much for whatever disaster it was when we were together." The colonel was not looking at her now. "But I have known since I met you that you were a passionate woman, and I felt that when I… when we…" He stopped.

She let out a long, slow breath and smoothed out her skirt again. "Colonel Fitzwilliam, you…"

"You won't resist him forever, that's all I'm saying," he said. "And perhaps I could have handled this better. Perhaps it was wrong of me to have told him about you—"

"No," she protested.

"I could have found some other way to help you. I need not have injected either of us into your life, and then—even now—you would be with your family. But instead, I went to him because I was ashamed of myself for taking what I thought was his, and the truth is, Miss Bennet, you do not belong to him. I—"

"It was *you*." She got to her feet. "You arranged for the convenient gambling debt."

His gaze caught hers, and it was written all over his face. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"How ever did you manage to find so much money? You, who made so much of your financial hardships?"

"I am not without resources or funds, Miss Bennet, and besides, I *owed* you."

"I didn't think you truly enjoyed yourself that much," she said darkly.

He stood up as well. “Please… you can’t give it back now.”

“No, I suppose I can’t.” She put a hand to her brow, trying to make sense of it all. “But he had nothing to do with it? Mr. Darcy didn’t?”

“No,” said Richard. “It was all me.”

She sighed. She sank back down into her chair.

He towered over her now, looking at her with something like trepidation. “I am sorry for everything, but I do wish you the best, and I—”

“And now you feel that because you gave me so much money, you can tell me what to do with myself. You feel that you can order me to stop seeing Mr. Darcy.”

He shook his head. “I can’t order you to do anything at all. But I would beg you, for your own sake, to go home.”

“You don’t think I wish to?” Her lower lip trembled. “I have written the letter so many times—”

“Hire a carriage and go there,” he said. “Today. Now.”

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“Your sister Jane is even now in town, I understand,” he said. “You could go there, to her. She is heavy with child, too far gone to go out into public, but I have it on good authority that she is here, and she would welcome you.”

“You don’t understand…”

“You might want to wait a bit on that, though, for I’m going there after I leave you, so perhaps you wouldn’t wish to run into me.”

“You’re going there? But whatever for?”

“Oh, it seems as if everyone in London is now convinced I’ve compromised Caroline Bingley—which I haven’t done, mind you—but I am going to marry her anyway, and I must officially go and—”

“Caroline *Bingley?*” Her voice was shrill. “You cannot be serious.”

He shrugged. “Well, I know no one else likes her, but I don’t mind her, really, and I find her a bit amusing, I must say. I almost think her rigidity is a bit endearing, because she does seem to be so ruled by it, as if she is helpless, and I find myself thinking about her rather more often than I would have imagined, and I rather like the idea of marrying her, actually, so I’m going to.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know why I’m making excuses to you. It is my own affair.”

She blinked at him, quite overcome. “Yes, I suppose it is. It is rather unexpected, though, you must admit. Of all the people I would have expected you to marry, I would not have guessed it would be her, nor that you would seem to have some admiration for her. I can see it all over you. I suppose my own quarrel with her hinged on the way she seemed to turn her brother away from my sister, but that seems to have worked itself out, so… I don’t have that rancor within me anymore. I don’t have the energy to dislike her, I suppose. I wish you

joy."

He chuckled softly. "Yes, well, thank you. Do think on what I said."

"I shall," she said.

"Then that is all I can ask. I shall not trespass upon your time any longer. Good morning, Miss Bennet."

"Mrs. Thistlehill," she said softly.

"Indeed, yes. A thousand pardons. Mrs. Thistlehill is what I meant to call you."

She licked her lips. "Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes?"

"Would it be so bad if he did?"

"If he did what?"

"Get me with child," she whispered.

"Oh…" Colonel Fitzwilliam swallowed. "Madam, you must realize that you—"

"I have not had a good reputation in quite some time," she said. "And I know he is honorable and that he cares about me and that he would love our children. It is not so bad for Maria Lucas, and perhaps…"

"He would hate himself for it, though," said the colonel. "It would be a breach of his honor to have broken his vows to his wife and a constant sign of his weakness. He would love you, but he would resent that you were a symbol of that. I think it would eat at him. He is not a man who can bear such things, you realize?"

"That is likely true," she admitted quietly. "You know him well."

"I'm very sorry," he said. "You deserved better than this life. You deserved all the happiness in the world. When I think of you in those early spring days at Rosings, walking on the grounds, the way you laughed… I am so dreadfully sorry, Elizabeth. I wish…"

"You should go," she said. "You have to ask for Caroline Bingley's hand, after all."

He nodded. "Yes. I do. I shall take my leave of you." He turned away.

She felt as though the air around her had suddenly taken on shape and weight and that it had settled on her own shoulders. She struggled under its pressure.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mr. Bingley was pacing in his study, shaking his head. “It’s just like Caroline to get herself into a scrape like this. After everything, she would thrust herself into ignominy at the very first opportunity, would she not?”

Richard was standing opposite Mr. Bingley’s desk, hands clasped in front of his body. “I don’t think this was her fault, truly.”

“When I heard the news last night, I was beside myself. My wife was wakened, you realize, and she is heavily with child, and in a tender frame of mind. I’m afraid she sobbed on Caroline’s behalf for longer than a quarter hour, while all the while, I assured her that she must not take on so, and that Caroline likely deserved such a thing.”

“I assure you, she did not,” said Richard.

“I don’t even understand why you’re here, sir,” said Mr. Bingley, looking up at him.

“I’m here to ask for your blessing to marry your sister.”

“Whatever for?” Mr. Bingley burst out with. Then he stopped pacing and threw up his hands. “Oh, I cannot have just said that aloud, can I? Blast.”

“I have it on good authority that at least half of the entire city is convinced that I have taken advantage of her,” said Richard. “Which, I should say, I haven’t. Perhaps my handkerchief has, but that’s not quite the same thing.”

“What are you on about?”

“*I* can’t have said *that* out loud,” Richard groaned.

“I should be most grateful if you are truly serious that you wish to marry her,” said Mr. Bingley.

“Of course I am,” said Richard. “And what’s more, I like her. I really do.”

Mr. Bingley snorted.

“No, I’m in earnest. Truly, I think everyone is a bit hard on her. I think she is a very lovely girl, and in possession of quite a number of charms. She has much to recommend her.”

Mr. Bingley’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, if that is the way you feel, then I must say I am…” He cleared his throat. “Of course, you have my blessing. Do you wish to talk about contracts and money and all of

that now?"

"Well, I would like to see her," said Richard. "How is she this morning?"

"I really couldn't say," said Mr. Bingley. "Yes, well, let's go and seek her out, shall we?" He gave Richard a bewildered grin and then led him out of the study.

They traveled down to the sitting room, where Mr. Bingley abruptly called out for everyone to clear the room.

Everyone rushed out.

They were alone.

Miss Bingley rose from the settee where she had been sitting. She was wearing a pale rose-colored morning dress, and it seemed to bring out the high color of her cheeks, and he could not take his eyes from her.

"You did come as you said," she said.

He closed the distance between them and he reached out to take one of her hands in his. She was not wearing gloves, and her skin was smooth and warm. He ran his thumb over her knuckles.

Her breath caught audibly. "Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"You should call me Richard now," he decided. "Have I told you that you're breathtaking?"

She flushed, looking away. "You are… I don't know… why do you say such things?"

"I suppose I should really and truly ask you to marry me. I haven't done that yet, have I?"

She smiled a small, pleased smile. "I accept, of course."

"Well, wait a moment. That was not a true question."

"Oh, I see." She laughed a little.

He seized her other hand.

She let out another breathy sigh.

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He kissed her.

She was stunned, her lips stiff when his met hers, but then they softened, and she accepted his mouth on hers, making a noise in the back of her throat that sounded very pleased indeed.

He let go of one of her hands and splayed his fingers over her back, urging her closer, pressing her body against his.

She acquiesced to this eagerly, putting her hands on his shoulders and opening her lips to him.

His tongue found hers, and it was soft and good and overwhelming.

She went boneless against him, clinging to him.

He thought he might have kissed her forever, but he thought it might not be the venue for such things. What if someone opened the

door on them? He pulled his face away, but she was still in his arms.

She gazed up at him with half-lidded eyes, and he liked her just-kissed expression, he decided. He liked it very much.

He reached up and ran his thumb over her cheekbone. “I have to go back to my duties with the army in a week’s time.”

“You said the war was over, sir.”

“And yet, my duties are not,” he said. “I will not be back for some months.”

“That is not enough time to marry, sir,” she said.

“My father is an earl. I might be able to procure a special license. I have my ways,” he said. “Everyone will expect it of us, since they are all saying that I’m the one who ripped your dress.”

“Hmm,” she said. “But we could wait until you are back? I don’t feel a week is enough time to prepare a proper wedding. And if we did, then everyone would know that I was not the least bit concerned about having been ruined.”

He laughed. “That is true. It would show our confidence in such a matter.”

“And I think it would annoy my brother,” she said. “Which I might find gratifying.”

“I can see why you would,” he admitted.

“Then it’s decided,” she said. “We shall wait.”

He tried to kiss her again.

She put her fingers to his lips. “Stop. Do that again, and I shall not be able to wait.”

“We are in no danger in your brother’s sitting room, Miss Bingley.”

“Caroline,” she corrected.

He moved her fingers away and kissed her again.

She entwined her arms around his neck.

He liked the feeling of her in his arms. He liked the feeling of her mouth on his. He couldn’t say that any of this displeased him.

* * *

When Mr. Darcy visited Elizabeth that evening, she seemed subdued. He questioned her about it, and eventually, she confessed to him about her visit from Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy was affronted, telling her that he had instructed the man to leave it alone, that none of it was his business.

“What did he say to you?” he asked her. She was across the room from him, as she always was. They were very careful never to be close enough to be in arms’ length of the other. They would not allow themselves to touch. It was easier in this house, which was much larger than that ramshackle hovel she used to live in.

She sipped at her tea and then set the cup in its saucer. “Oh, he seems convinced we are to be carried away by lust and that it will all

go very badly for me."

"That is not going to happen," said Mr. Darcy.

"Yes, I suppose you are quite satisfied with your wife," she said.

He grimaced. "Must we speak of such things?"

"No," she said. "Let us then leave the conversation entirely."

"I shall speak to Richard, and I shall tell him—"

"Let us leave behind discussing him as well."

He grimaced again, thinking of Richard and her entwined together, a thought that tormented him whenever it surfaced in his brain.

"Not because…" She sighed. "Come now, Fitz, you know that meant nothing."

"Yes." He agreed with her, even though it wasn't true, because it wouldn't have bothered him if it had meant nothing, and Richard wouldn't have felt as if he had the right to come here and give her such advice if he didn't have a certain intimacy with her because of it all. It was a lie people told themselves, that the act meant nothing. It always meant *something*. It was only that sometimes it meant something ugly. "What does he think you should do about it?"

"What?"

"Richard," he said. "He told me that I should give in and take you to bed to rid myself of my fascination with you. Did he say the same to you?"

"No, the opposite, and I can't believe he said that to you." She huffed. "Of course, he seemed to assume our carnal union was a foregone conclusion."

"It is not," said Darcy.

"No," she said.

It was quiet.

She spoke again, her voice very soft and lilting. "Does it bother you, thinking of me with him?"

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Does it dim your desire for me?"

"Who says I have any desire—"

"I shall tell you something worse, then," she said, lifting her chin. "I shall tell you something about Mr. Wickham."

He choked. His arm went out, and he knocked over his teacup. Luckily it was empty, and it did not break. He set it aright with trembling hands. He could not deny he'd wondered this, but he'd not pursued it since the first time meeting with her, remembering the vehement force with which she'd declared she didn't want to think about Mr. Wickham. "Lizzy, please."

"It was at the beginning," she said. "And he offered to help us, Maria and me. But you know him well, Mr. Darcy, he was not willing to do it out of the kindness of his heart. He wished to be paid, and he

knew I had no means of doing so, and he decided he would take his payment from—"

"Stop." His voice was strangled. He felt as though he might vomit. He struggled to stand.

She stood too. "I am very tainted, Mr. Darcy. You would never want something as used up as I am."

He couldn't speak.

"There," she said, drawing in a perfunctory breath. "Perhaps that will help, then. Perhaps that will make me disgusting to you."

His lips parted.

"No?" she said. "Would you like me to talk about it in more detail, then? Would you like to know the places he cajoled me into putting my mouth?"

He made a noise as if he'd been punched in the gut. And then he turned away from her and walked out of her sitting room and out of her house.

He had a carriage, but he didn't use it. He walked all the way back to his own house. It was late, but when he got there, the lights were on.

He rushed inside to find the place in a tizzy, the servants running to and fro, Georgiana hastily dressed and standing outside of Anne's bedroom.

Apparently, Anne had suffered some kind of horrible pain and bleeding. The doctor was with her now, and also a surgeon, who the doctor called when he'd seen how much blood there was.

Darcy went into the room, and the doctor looked up at him, accusations in his eyes. *Where have you been, sir?* But the words were unspoken.

"Your wife will not lose the babe," was what the doctor said instead.

"The…" What? Darcy tried to catch Anne's gaze, but her eyes were closed, and she was lying on her back on the bed, looking pale and wan and too small. Was there a thickening at her waist? He could not discern it.

"The surgeon has given her something to help her rest," said the doctor. "She'll likely have to spend the rest of her time in bed, until the babe comes, but there is every chance that they will both be healthy."

"She is with child?" said Darcy, and his voice sounded too small to have come from him, because he was suddenly terrified, and he thought that it couldn't be true. He felt, suddenly, as though he was still a small boy himself and that it was impossible for him to have fathered a child. How could he have done this? How could she be increasing?

"You did not know?" said the doctor. "I would say she is several months gone. She probably will be delivered in about five months or so."

Darcy swallowed.

"She has likely been too active," said the doctor. "She says she has a history of being sickly, and I believe she has simply overtaxed herself. She would not have been used to so much activity in any case, but with another small life growing within her, it has simply been too much."

"Yes," said Darcy. "Yes, of course." This had been his concern before, had it not? That if he visited her bed, he would get her with child, and she would not be strong enough to bring it into the world.

Now, it was happening, and she was bleeding, and… Lord, he had made a mess of everything, of her, of poor Anne.

Later, after everyone had gone, and Georgiana had gone back to bed, and the servants were all quiet again, he was in his own room, staring at his own bed, in which he had not slept in God knows how long. He had spent every night with her.

Of course, she's with child, you idiot. He should have realized that must have happened. He'd been there every night and there had been no break in it. She had not bled. She was with child all along, for months now. She must have known. Why hadn't she said anything to him? Perhaps she had assumed he knew it, too, but he thought most women would wish to speak of such a thing with their husbands.

He stared at his bed for some time and then he went to Anne's room.

She stirred. "Fitzwilliam?"

"No, darling, go back to sleep," he sat down on the bed next to her.

She rolled over on her side and rested her head on her own elbow. "I'm so frightfully stupid, Fitzwilliam. Mama never explained anything to me. I didn't know that if I wasn't having my… that if my… I didn't know."

He reached out and found her hand. "I should have thought of it. I am stupid, too." He squeezed her fingers. "We shall be careful with you from now on."

"Are you pleased, though?" She smiled at him. "I think you will be the best father in the world, and I am quite excited about the prospect of my own sweet babe. It is good news, even if it took such a frightening thing for us to get it."

He felt a lump rising in his throat. "Yes," he said. "Yes, of course, I am pleased."

"I want to make you happy," she said, yawning.

"You make me exceedingly happy, darling," he assured her, squeezing her fingers again.

"I can't sleep without you here," she said. "You always come to me and lie down with me. Sleep here tonight, even if we can only sleep."

"I shouldn't wish to bother you."

"It's no bother." She yawned again. "Please. I want to feel your arms around me."

He nodded. He shed his clothes and climbed into bed with her in his small clothes. She snuggled into him, and he felt afraid to hold her, though he did it anyway. He was afraid if he held her too tightly, she might break.

Still, he clutched his wife's body close as she drifted off to sleep, and he sent up silent prayers for her. *Don't let her die bringing our child into the world. Please don't let me have killed her.*

* * *

"You have not killed her, Fitz," said Elizabeth, watching Mr. Darcy talk into her fireplace. He was bent over it, gripping the mantle, and he had been ranting about Anne's pregnancy for the entire time that they'd been together, nearly an hour now. "Women deliver babes all the time, even after having difficult times carrying them. She will be all right as long as she stays in bed. You must stop worrying about it."

He shook his head. "Would that I could. But it is my fault, don't you see? I am weak. I am wretched."

"It is not a weakness to, er, to get one's wife with child."

"I promised I would wait. I promised that I must not until she was stronger. She *was* getting stronger. And then I… and then I used her, because I couldn't have you." The words were an accusation.

She drew herself up. "That is not my fault."

He rounded on her, nostrils flaring.

She got to her feet. "Fitz, if you have come here to be angry with me for the fact that you have had somewhere to… to slake your desires, whereas I have been entirely alone, then I shall not have it. You may simply leave. I cannot hear that."

He turned back to the fireplace. "No, of course, it is my own failing. I do not hold you responsible. I should have stopped coming to see you all those months ago."

"Yes, and I should have gone to my family," she said.

"Why haven't you?"

"I don't know. Obviously, there is something faulty within me."

"There is nothing at fault with you, Lizzy. You are perfection."

"Fitz…" Why did she enjoy hearing that?

"I…" He turned to face her. "I should tell you that you don't disgust me, and I cannot be turned from my love for you because of the villainy that was perpetrated upon you by Mr. Wickham. I know not where he is, but if I should ever find him again, I think I shall kill him."

“Fitz,” she said, taking a step back, colliding with the chair where she had been sitting.

“What he did to you is horrific. I don’t see that there is any real difference between using physical might to force a woman or using her situation to force her. He did violence to you. It had nothing to do with you and everything to do with him.”

Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. She was too overcome to speak.

He closed the distance between them, and he reached out and suddenly enfolded her in his arms.

She was stunned by this, but she allowed it. She allowed herself to be tucked against him, and she buried her face against his shoulder, and she cried.

He held onto her. “I can’t see how you could have any desire for any man after all of the horrid things that seem to have been visited upon you by them, not least of which by me.”

Her voice was muffled. “You have never hurt me.”

“Lord, Lizzy, all I do is hurt you.” His arms tightened around her.

She flattened her hands against his chest. She sniffed, trying to pull back her tears, but she couldn’t. They intensified. Now, she was truly sobbing.

He held her, murmuring softly in her ear. She wasn’t even sure if they were words, exactly. They were soothing noises, and her sobs were too loud to understand them anyway.

Finally, the violence of it left her, and she sagged against him. She quieted, laying her cheek against his chest, both of her palms pressed into him. Now, quiet, she could hear his heart beating, and it was going too fast, tripping in its rhythm now and then.

She murmured, “I am all right now. You may let me go.”

“I don’t wish to let you go,” he said. “But I certainly shall if it is causing you any discomfort.”

“Oh, quite the opposite,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “Then stay here, just like this, if you please.”

She sighed, and she shut her eyes.

Time passed.

The moments stretched out in a warmth and goodness that she hadn’t realized she had missed so much. Human closeness, the feeling of touch, it had been a very long time since she had felt it. And this touch was only comfort. It did not seek to take anything from her.

His heart slowed a bit. It grew even and steady and that was a comfort, too. She allowed herself a small reverie, imagining that they could do this every day, that she could fall asleep like this, with her head resting on his chest.

She smiled. “I am glad this is not torment for you.”

“How could you say such a thing?” His voice had taken on a

different quality, very deep and very loose, and she'd never heard him sound that way before.

"It is only that… well, if merely talking to me causes, er, certain urges to rise within you, then certainly it would seem that this would be impossible."

"I am not aroused by your tears," he murmured.

"Of course not," she said.

"You are utterly safe with me, Lizzy, no matter what Richard said to you. Do you understand? You need never worry that I am only near you because of some prurient desire on my part. That is the least of what I feel when I am with you."

She moved her face, leaning back to look up at him, but she kept her hands on his chest. "I am not frightened of you, Fitz. Not of anything you feel for me."

"Aren't you?" He raised his eyebrows. "You have been very adamant that you will never welcome me into your bed. I would of course respect such a wish. I have no desire to—"

"That's not why I say that," she said. She considered. "Well, yes, I am perhaps afraid, but not of that, just of how deeply I will fall for you if we were to be intimate in that manner, if we were to be… joined."

He swallowed visibly.

"My apologies," she breathed. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that aloud."

"No, perhaps not," he agreed, his voice also barely audible. He lifted one hand and cupped her cheek with one of his palms. Oh, but his hands were large and strong, and that was very nice. "However, your eyes and nose are quite red from crying, and I am abundantly in control of myself. I would be in control, no matter what. I am stronger than any yearning I might have. My spirit is stronger than my fleshly desires. You can trust me."

"Even though you will no longer be able to go to your wife?" she said.

"Yes, even then."

"You said you were weak."

He let out a shaky breath. He rested his forehead against hers.

She let out a little moan at that closeness.

"I can be strong," he said. A pause. "That is something you think about?"

"What is?"

He hesitated. "Joining." He was breathless.

"I do," she said. "Yes, of course, I do."

"I would have thought that you would not think of the act favorably after… after everything."

“Well, I am only human in the end, Fitz. My flesh is driven by its natural urges, just as everyone else’s, no matter what else has happened. And besides, the feelings we have for each other are strong. With you, I know it would be… different.”

He kissed her.

She slid her hands up over his chest to his broad shoulders. She dug her fingers into them.

He groaned against her mouth and tore himself away.

She let out a noisy breath.

He went back to the fireplace and gripped the mantle. “My apologies.”

She licked her lips.

“I *can* be strong,” he said, but she wasn’t sure if he was saying this to convince her or to convince himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Time passed.

Darcy didn't kiss Elizabeth again. He didn't take her hand or touch her skin or tuck her into his arms. He thought about doing those things, but he didn't. He should have given her up, sent her back to her family, forced her to go, but he was an abominable man for all his protestations of his own honor and strength and goodness, and he did nothing to discourage their continued company.

Anne stayed in bed for a month, and all was well. Her belly had begun to swell visibly, although he thought she still seemed too small, and he worried for her constantly.

She could not attend Georgiana's wedding, but it was probably just as well, for women who were visibly increasing did not tend to show themselves in public anyway.

Darcy thought the wedding went well, but he was not the best judge of such things, having never paid much attention to what went into a wedding in the end. Georgiana was pleased with it, and that was all that mattered, to his way of thinking.

She and Mr. Graysmith went off on their honeymoon, and the house was empty and silent without her. Darcy had always known someday she would marry and leave, but perhaps he had not been prepared for the reality of it.

Weeks passed, and Anne had no more troubles, so she was not pleased to be confined. They argued about her getting up and moving about, and he tried to convince her to stay in bed, and she would not hear of it. She did nothing strenuous, but she went down for meals and sat up to write letters in the mornings.

Once, she spoke of the idea of going back to Pemberley, but he told her he would rather be in town, where they were close to doctors if necessary. She said, pointedly, "And you would miss your gentleman's club."

He still came to her bed every night when he left Elizabeth, though he did nothing but hold his wife. She would turn, with her back to him, and he would wrap around her from behind, one of his hands coming around to rest on the swell of her belly.

Sometimes, he felt happiness and awe at the thought of it.

Sometimes, he felt terror and dread. He was frightened to form an attachment to the growing babe. What if it didn't survive?

Almost always, he felt a sort of burning hatred towards himself for the idea that this had ever happened. He had betrayed both of the women in his life. He didn't deserve either of them. He certainly didn't deserve a child.

And once, when worrying about Anne, an oily voice spoke up in the back of his mind. *Of course, if Anne dies, you could marry—*

But he stopped the thought before he could finish it, horrified. He would not think such a thing. He would *never* think such a thing.

And time passed.

The weeks turned to months, and Anne was strong and healthy. The babe grew and so did the swell of her stomach. He felt the babe kick his hands from within her, and he was stunned and awed to think of it. He knew the babe was there, of course, but its movement somehow made it seem even more real to him. He could not help but be attached to the little one now, no matter if it was foolish.

He and Anne spent chilly afternoons curled up by the fire, talking about names, talking about whether it would be a girl or a boy. He wanted a boy, of course, because then she could be done with the madness of it. With an heir, he would not have to make her try again, risking her again.

But he remembered Georgiana as a small girl, and he could not help but think that a little girl would be especially fine.

When he would sit with Anne or lie with her in his arms, he would feel such a surge of emotions, such power to think of this little family that had somehow grown from him and Anne, and the future they were making together. He would tell himself that he should not need anything besides this, that certainly this must fulfill him.

And then dusk would come, and despite it all, he would have to go to her.

He could not leave Elizabeth be, it seemed.

Even though there was no future in it.

* * *

London
February, 1816

"Perhaps after your child is born," Elizabeth was saying.

Darcy looked at her sharply from the other side of the room. He was surprised to hear her say this, because they were careful never to really talk about that aspect of his life. His wife, her condition, it was all easier if it wasn't brought up. "What are you speaking of?"

"I don't know," she said, shrugging. "I suppose it is idle talk, truly, but I have been trying to bring myself to broach the subject. What

passes between us, we both know deep down that it must end sometime, and perhaps, when your child is born, that would be an opportune time."

He licked his lips. "You would go to your family, you mean?"

"Yes," she said. "I have made up my mind to do it many times, and then somehow I always get stymied. I am far too weak, and I seem to not be able to force myself to do it."

"It's my fault."

"Yes," she said. "Everything is your fault, Fitz." She laughed a little to let him know that she was only teasing.

"It truly is my fault, Lizzy," he said. "I keep you here."

"I keep myself here."

"If I stopped visiting you, you would go," he said.

"That may be true," she said. "But by the same token, if I went, you would stop visiting me. At any rate, perhaps that will naturally happen after the babe arrives. You will be overcome with excitement and love, and you will want all your time to dote upon the infant, and it will be easier if I am not here to distract you."

"I shan't stop visiting you after the baby is born, if that is what you are suggesting," he said.

"Well, perhaps you should."

"Obviously, I should, but we both know that won't happen."

She was quiet, looking down at her hands in her lap.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know that you mean well to suggest that you leave, and I have no objection to your going, but I think if we spin some fiction to ourselves that we are going to become stronger about all this at some point, we are doing ourselves no service."

"Fitz…"

"No," he said. "Perhaps you are stronger than me. In fact, I know you are. Everything you have endured has made you thus. I cannot stay away from you. I have tried, and I am incapable of it. If this must end between us, I'm afraid it will fall to you."

"Well, perhaps I shall do it," she said. "After the babe is born, I shall go."

"Truly?"

She squared her shoulders. "Truly."

"Well, good," he said. "You should go back to your family, and I hate that I keep them from you. But if you do go, you must wait until I can say goodbye to you, of course. I will send news of the babe's birth, and then you must stay until I can get to you."

"I don't know, Fitz, I think that may be foolish. I think I must go immediately upon hearing word."

"Well, then we shall never be able to say goodbye."

"Perhaps, as we get closer to the birth, we shall have to treat each

meeting as if it will be our last."

"On our last meeting, I shall wish to…"

Her gaze snapped up to his. "To what?"

"Well, to… touch you? To kiss you, perhaps. If it is the last time, then what can the harm be?"

"Well, we cannot do that every night we see each other."

"No, of course not."

"We must do it only once."

He nodded. "Right, only once. But when?"

She stood up, smoothing out her skirts. "Perhaps now. Now, and never again."

He hesitated. "All right," he said finally. He took a step toward her.

She took a step toward him.

There was a knock at the door.

They were both so startled that they leaped away from the other.

Elizabeth's voice was a squeak. "Who could that be?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Elizabeth backed away from the door, leaving it hang open, staring at the woman who was framed in the open doorway, wrapped in a cloak against the winter chill. The woman's nose was red and her expression mirrored Elizabeth's.

She was shocked.

"Miss de Bourgh," said Elizabeth. She shook her herself. "Apologies, Mrs. Darcy. Won't you come in?"

"You're dead," said Anne.

Mr. Darcy was there, coming across the threshold to take hold of his wife and pull her inside. Mr. Darcy shut the door behind her. "It's despicably cold out there, and it's very late. What are you doing out of bed?"

"How long has she been alive?" said Anne, looking up at him.

Elizabeth was watching Darcy with his wife, and it was agony to see them thus. She could see his concern for her all over him. The way he touched Anne…

Well, Mr. Darcy never touched *her*, after all.

"She was never dead, don't be foolish," said Mr. Darcy. "It's not as if she came back from the dead or anything ridiculous like that."

"I have tea and biscuits," said Elizabeth. She was surprised how normal her voice sounded. "Would you care for anything, Mrs. Darcy?"

"She needs to sit down," said her husband, who was pointedly not looking at Elizabeth. He only had eyes for his wife.

Elizabeth's gaze settled on the woman's swollen belly. Mr. Darcy's babe. Elizabeth felt cold all over. She gestured. "Take her to the sitting room, of course."

Mr. Darcy wrapped his arm around Anne and guided her out of the entryway.

Elizabeth watched them go. She watched the way that Anne leaned into Mr. Darcy's body. Elizabeth's hands were shaking. She clasped them behind her back to make that stop. Drawing in a breath, as if steeling herself for battle, she followed them.

Anne was sitting in a chair near the fire, and Mr. Darcy was unbuttoning her cloak. Anne was talking. "I suppose she simply

disappeared. Everyone assumed she was dead. And I suppose you got word last summer. That is why we left Pemberley for town so suddenly in the summer. It was then. You found her and came after her."

Darcy's face twitched. "What are you doing here, Anne? Why aren't you in bed?"

Anne twisted around in her chair to face Elizabeth. She looked at her while she spoke to her husband. "Georgiana said that Richard was so strange when she spoke to him about your gentleman's club, and then later, when we were at that ball at the Young residence, I spoke to him, and he seemed strange about it then, too. I suppose the idea took root in my mind then, that you were lying about it."

"I'm sorry," said Darcy. "I couldn't tell you the truth. I thought it would hurt you, and I didn't want—"

"I kept telling myself I was imagining things," said Anne in a funny voice. "Because when you are with me, Fitzwilliam, you are so attentive and good to me, and… I thought, 'I shall follow him, and I shall see that all is well, and I shall put this horrible suspicion to rest.'"

Elizabeth crossed to stand behind a chair. She gripped the back of it for balance and strength. "It is not the way you suppose, Mrs. Darcy. Your husband is an honorable man, and there is nothing untoward between us. He—"

"He asked you to marry him," said Anne, with heat in her voice. "And then when he thought you were dead, he went to pieces. And you say there is nothing untoward?" She let out a laugh, a harsh, awful laugh.

"I assure you," said Elizabeth, "he only comes to talk to me. We are friends and nothing more."

Anne was still laughing that awful laugh. She turned back to her husband, and the laughter died in her throat. "You expect me to believe this?"

"We do only talk," said Mr. Darcy to her. "That is true."

"Fitzwilliam—"

"But it would be a lie to term us only friends," said Darcy, and his voice cracked.

Anne put a hand to her mouth, uttering a noise that sounded like a wounded animal.

"Fitz, don't be daft!" Elizabeth cried.

"Fitz?" said Anne, horrified. "But only Georgiana calls you that." She convulsed, letting out an audible sob.

Mr. Darcy tried to pull his wife into his arms.

But she pushed out of his grasp and got to her feet. She staggered across the room, coming for Elizabeth, her face red, her expression

tortured, tears spilling down over her cheeks.

"Please, Mrs. Darcy," said Elizabeth, coming out from behind the chair to intercept her. "You mustn't overexert yourself in your condition. Perhaps your husband should take you home."

"I don't want to be anywhere near that man," said Anne, resting a hand on her protruding stomach. "I can't bear the sight of him."

"Please," said Mr. Darcy, who was still across the room, looking bereft. "You must let me get you home and into bed. I shall leave you alone then, if that is what you wish, but—"

"You knew," said Anne, looking at Elizabeth. "You knew he was married."

Elizabeth looked away.

"You knew I was with child?" said Anne.

Elizabeth bit down on her bottom lip.

"Answer me," Anne thundered, sounding so similar to her mother Lady Catherine that it was almost as if the woman's ghost had been summoned from the grave.

Elizabeth raised her gaze. "I knew. I'm sorry. I should have turned him away."

"She needed me, Anne," came Darcy's voice. "You have no idea what she has been through, and she needed someone to aid her—"

"Well, why not her family? Why doesn't your family know that you're alive, Miss Bennet?"

"It's all very complicated, darling," said Mr. Darcy. "You must promise that you do not tell anyone about having seen her, no one at all."

Anne whirled to face him. "You expect me to have loyalty to your mistress? Have you lost your mind?"

"She's not my mistress," said Mr. Darcy.

"I shall tell my family," said Elizabeth. "And I shall never see Mr. Darcy again. If he tries to come back, I shall turn him away. I have been weak, but I swear to you, Mrs. Darcy, we were speaking of my departure even as you knocked upon the door. This was coming to a close between us, and it is now over."

"Is it?" Anne turned to look at her husband. "Tell me it's over, Fitzwilliam."

Darcy's jaw worked. He didn't say anything. The silence stretched out too long.

"For God's sake," said Elizabeth. "Tell her."

"You can both be damned to the pits of hell for all I care," said Anne, breaking out into fresh tears. She ran past Elizabeth.

"Anne!" cried Darcy.

Anne went to the door and flung it open. She hurtled out into the wintry night.

“Damnation, woman.” Darcy was running after her.

Elizabeth went behind him, on his heels. By the time she got to the door, Anne was already at the street, sobbing as she ran for the carriage waiting outside for her.

Darcy was running for her. He yelled her name.

One of the horses started, rearing up on its hind legs.

Anne saw it, and let out a little yelp, which only served to further startle the animal. Its eyes widened and it snorted. She was too close.

The driver leaped down from the carriage, speaking to the horse in a soothing voice, going for the animal.

“Get back from there,” Darcy screamed.

But Anne seemed frozen, rooted to the spot, gaping at the horse.

Darcy lunged for her.

Anne shrieked.

It was a blur. Horse hooves. Anne. Mr. Darcy. The driver. A man’s voice was screaming, and so was a woman’s. But then Elizabeth realized that was her own voice.

Elizabeth rushed forward, collapsing on the ground next to Mr. Darcy, who was kneeling over Anne’s inert form.

Anne’s head was misshapen. Blood was pouring out onto the cobblestones behind her head. Her hair was splayed out in all directions, and blood was soaking strands of it.

The driver was yanking on the horse, pulling it away.

The horse’s hoof must have hit Anne’s head. She had been trampled —

Elizabeth leapt to her feet. “We need help. We need a surgeon. I know where to find one. I shall go now. I shall bring him directly.”

Mr. Darcy didn’t acknowledge her.

She picked up her skirts and ran.

* * *

Elizabeth’s fingers were so cold that she could no longer feel them. She stood at the periphery, shivering as she watched.

The surgeon had come to the scene and pronounced Anne dead immediately. In a low, regretful voice, he had told Mr. Darcy that there was no chance of his wife recovering, that there was nothing to be done for her. And then he had briskly moved on to the matter of the child inside her, which was still alive.

The surgeon did not ask Mr. Darcy what he wished to do. Instead, he had sent Elizabeth running to fetch his wife, who assisted him occasionally in his work, he said. He said that he needed his tools.

Now, the cobblestones were awash with blood. The surgeon had cut Anne open, and he was going to save the babe.

Elizabeth kept looking at Mr. Darcy, but he wasn’t looking at her. He was gaping at the gore that had been his wife, and Elizabeth kept

thinking that he shouldn't be watching this, that *she* shouldn't be watching this, that this shouldn't be happening, that—

A baby's cry rent the air.

The surgeon's wife was wrapping the tiny thing—so tiny—in blankets, holding the bundle close.

"Where do you live?" said the surgeon to Mr. Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy and his wife were out on a drive," spoke up the driver smoothly. "She wanted to get out and inspect one of the street lights and the horse got spooked. They live on the other side of town."

"Very good," said the surgeon. His gaze fixed on Elizabeth. "And you?"

"She must have heard the noise and come to help," said the driver.

"Yes," said Elizabeth.

Darcy turned to look at her. The expression on his face was not like any she had ever seen before. She did not think she could fathom such pain.

"So, you may return to your home, then, madam," said the surgeon. "Your assistance was appreciated." He turned to Mr. Darcy. "And you, sir, you will take my carriage. My wife will bring the babe along with the both of you. I shall remain here with your wife's remains. Do we have an undertaker to alert as to the collection of them?"

Darcy licked his lips. His voice was hollow. "Mr. Quinn Rogers will do for that."

"Very good," said the surgeon. "Off with you, then."

Darcy looked down at what was left of Anne. "I don't know if I should leave her."

"I'll stay with her, sir," said the surgeon. "Your daughter needs you now."

Darcy looked at the surgeon's wife and the baby in her arms as if he had not realized the babe was there until now, which was odd, because the baby was still crying.

"Would you like to hold her?" said the surgeon's wife.

Darcy blinked and then shook his head. He cast one glance at Elizabeth and then he turned and began walking away, off into the night.

"See to him, Matilda," said the surgeon.

"Of course," said the surgeon's wife, hurrying after Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth wanted to go after him, but she didn't dare.

Though she had been dismissed by the surgeon, she stayed outside in the cold until the undertaker had come to collect Anne's body, until the horse who had killed her had been carted off. It would be killed, too, of course. Then the surgeon was gone, and the carriage was gone, and the driver was gone, and there was nothing left but the blood.

So, she went into her house and shut her door against that.

Be a dream, she thought to herself. *Be a horrible nightmare. Let me wake from it now.*

But she did not wake.

Eventually, however, she did sleep. When she woke in the morning, the blood was still there on the cobblestones, the only sign that it had happened.

She didn't think she would make it through the day, but time had a funny way of going on, even when one felt it should stop short. Before long, it was evening. Usually, Mr. Darcy visited her every evening, but of course he didn't come.

She hadn't really expected him to come.

Even so, she wished he had. Perhaps he needed her right now. Or perhaps she was the only thing he didn't need.

The next day, she began to formulate a plan. If the driver's story was to be believed, it was all a coincidence that such a thing had occurred outside her house. She did not know if that would be the case, but there had always been the concern of the wagging tongues of servants, and they had not given her up yet, so she must hope that it would remain so.

If it was the case, then this was the perfect reason for her to have recovered her supposedly lost memory. The shocking appearance of a face from her past, the violence and the blood, all of it seemed to be just the thing.

But it could all be ruined, of course, if she and Mr. Darcy did not have their stories straight, so she thought that she needed to speak to him.

She sent him a letter, paying her maid to go and deliver it.

But the letter was returned unopened, the seal intact.

If she had truly just recovered her memory, it made sense that she might delay for a few days, to adjust to the knowledge of it all. But she couldn't put it off forever.

So, she must go and see Mr. Darcy.

She didn't allow herself to wish that anything else would happen when she went to see him. She didn't allow herself to think that without a wife, there was no barrier to—

No, that was not a thought to be finished.

So, she dressed herself in the best of her clothing and set out to walk to Mr. Darcy's house. When she got there, she hesitated, thinking that this might be disastrous. Perhaps Mr. Darcy's sister might be there, or any number of other people who might recognize her.

But if she were going to reenter society anyway, it would not matter. If she had been shocked to see Mr. Darcy for the first time the other night, then this visit made sense within that narrative.

However, when she knocked on the door, one of the servants

informed her that Mr. Darcy wasn't at home.

"Well, then where is he?" said Elizabeth. "Where would a man go in the midst of all of this that has befallen him?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, madam," said the servant. "If you have a card that you would like to leave—"

"Elizabeth," interrupted a ravaged voice. Mr. Darcy stepped through the door way into the entry way. He was not wearing a jacket or a waistcoat and his shirt hung open at the collar. He had not shaved in several days. His chin and cheeks were covered in growth. There were dark circles under his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you," she said. "I… may we talk privately, sir?"

"Let her in," said Mr. Darcy to the servant, who did.

Elizabeth wasn't sure what to do.

Mr. Darcy went back through the doorway, out of sight.

She hurried after him.

He glanced at her but didn't wait for her. Instead, he climbed the steps.

She caught up to him.

At the top of the steps, he went into a room that was obviously a nursery. He shut the door behind them.

The room had a cradle and a number of toys that were far too big for a small baby. An enormous rocking horse dominated one corner. Elizabeth looked at it and shuddered, thinking of the horses hooves rearing up over Anne as she was frozen in fear.

Darcy went to the cradle. "I have named her Anne. She is very small, and they do not know if she will live. She may be sleeping too often, I think, but I know nothing of babes."

"Babies do sleep most of the time, I understand," said Elizabeth, coming over to the other side of the cradle. She peered down at the small babe tucked in amongst the blankets. Her eyes were closed, but she was perfectly formed, a beautiful child.

He lifted his gaze to her. "You and I together, we killed her mother."

Elizabeth's lips parted and a little noise of disbelief came out.

"I don't mean we did it on purpose, of course," said Mr. Darcy, looking back at his daughter. "We did not. We told ourselves pretty lies about what we felt for each other. I termed it love, but I don't think it was that at all, not if this is the result."

She could not find words to respond.

"Whatever it is, it brings only death and destruction and misery in its wake."

"Perhaps," she choked. "I am sorry, sir, and I truly suppose that I did not think enough of poor Mrs. Darcy and how this would—"

"I don't mean for you to apologize." He glanced at her, sighing.

“This is more my fault than yours. You made no promises to my wife. You did not owe her your protection or your fidelity.”

She pressed her lips together.

“I must admit, I was seized by wretched temptation. Now, there is nothing standing in our way, is there? There is a period of mourning, but once that is past, nothing bars me from having you now, from making you my wife as I always intended.”

She drew in a noisy breath. Oh, he had given it words, he had said it out loud.

“But,” he continued, “I am convinced that would be wrong. After what I have done, I do not deserve to have my heart’s desire. And I am sure that our union was never meant to be. If it had been, all these calamities that have befallen us would not have done so. It is a sign, don’t you see?” He was pleading with her to understand.

A long silence passed between them.

She cleared her throat. “I am going to go to my family now. I shall say that the coincidence of the tragedy occuring outside my home is what brought my memory back, seeing you after all this time.”

“Oh,” he said his voice brisk now. “Yes, surely, I suppose there is no way to hide the fact that I was there, not after all of this. If my driver’s story is believed, it should go well for you.”

She swallowed. “I wanted to make sure you would not contradict me.”

He nodded. “You needn’t worry on that score. I think it will be easy to say that my surprise in discovering you alive was tempered in the knowledge of my wife’s death.” He said this flatly, as if he were discussing the weather.

“I am… I am so very sorry for your loss. I am appalled that it even happened. It does not seem real.”

He only watched her, his face expressionless. “Thank you for your expression of sympathy.”

Then it was quiet again.

Elizabeth looked down at the baby for a moment. The babe was so very, very small. She had been born too soon. Would she live? Elizabeth uttered a brief prayer, begging for the baby’s life.

“Is that all?” said Mr. Darcy.

“Yes,” she said. “I shall take my leave of you.”

“Yes, I think that is for the best,” said Mr. Darcy. “Our business is quite concluded, Mrs. Thistlehill. Good day.”

“Good day,” she responded softly, and then she did take her leave of him. She left, and she did not turn back.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elizabeth was oddly not as destroyed by his words as she would have thought she might be.

In fact, some part of her was strangely relieved.

It was as if a spell had been broken. Some evil witchcraft, like something from a Shakespearean soliloquy, had drawn her to this man and bound her to him. Now, she was free.

She did not bother with a letter but hired a carriage directly and traveled to Hertfordshire. She arrived late in the day, and when she embarked from the carriage, she stared at Longbourn with such a feeling in her heart as to make her entire body burst.

Why had she waited so long?

Simply being here made her feel better.

She walked slowly up the walk towards the door, assailed by memories. Here was the place where she and Jane had somehow gotten a doll stuck in the branches of that very tree and how they had wailed until their papa had retrieved it for them, declaring them silly girls to throw a doll they so dearly loved.

Here was the place that she had skinned her knee when she had been running from one of the Lucas boys.

Here was the bush that bloomed in the summer with the loveliest of yellow flowers.

She knocked on the door, and it was answered by Mrs. Hill, who looked almost exactly the same, and how was that possible?

It has only been four years, she reminded herself. It only felt like a lifetime.

Mrs. Hill took one look at her and her eyes widened and she choked. She took too steps backward, putting both hands to her chest. "Lord," she finally managed. "It's you, miss."

"It's me," said Elizabeth.

"Oh, Lord," said Mrs. Hill. "Oh, Lord, it cannot be."

A familiar amused voice filtered out from within the house. "Now, Hill, what ever is the matter? Upon my word, I have enough silly family members. If my servants go silly as well, I shall—" But then her father appeared in the doorway, and his voice died immediately.

Elizabeth's heart contracted painfully and then expanded to three

times its normal size. “Papa,” she breathed.

“Lizzy?” said her father, and his eyes were shining, filling with tears. “Is it really my Lizzy?”

“It is I,” she said. “It is I. I have come home.”

Her father took two lurching steps toward her, holding out his arms.

She threw herself into them. “Papa, Papa, I forgot everything. I didn’t know who I was or where I came from. I had no notion of it, and I made a whole new life. I had a husband. He died, though, and then I was alone, and then two nights ago, a carriage stopped in front of my house, and who was it, but—”

“Slow down, Lizzy,” said her father, pulling away. “There’ll be time for that later.” Tears were streaming down his face. “Let me look at you, my darling.” He turned to Mrs. Hill. “You’ll want to send someone for Jane, I think.”

Elizabeth knew that Jane and her husband were no longer in London, or she might have gone directly there to see her sister. The Bingley family still resided at Netherfield for some of the time, but they no longer let the house, they owned it.

Her father cupped both hands on either side of her cheeks and gazed at her, shaking his head. “Oh, you are real. I cannot believe it. I cannot.”

“I know,” she said. “It is like a wonderful dream.”

He laughed, or perhaps it was a sob. He was smiling. She knew that, so he was happy.

They held onto each other for some time, simply smiling at each other, and Elizabeth felt holes inside her soul begin to mend themselves, painful places of emptiness she had not even been truly aware she was enduring.

Wrapped up in home, in love, her father’s love, it healed her.

Long, long moments passed.

Then her father laughed. “I suppose we must tell your mother.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth. “Yes, I suppose.” She laughed too.

“Mrs. Bennet!” roared her father, never taking his eyes off of her. “You’d best come and see this.”

Her mother appeared almost immediately. “There’s no need to yell, Mr. Bennet. I have not become deaf, you know, and I won’t be—oh, dear. It’s our Lizzy.”

“Yes,” said her father. “She’s come back to us.”

“But where has she been?” said her mother, crossing over to both of them. “Why, that Maria Lucas turned up, too, but she was the mistress to an earl and with children born out of the bounds of marriage, and if Lizzy is here—”

“She forgot us,” said her father. “Go back, Lizzy, explain it now.”

He lowered his hands but he could not take his gaze from her.

She sniffed, wiping at her cheeks, at her own tears. “The first thing I could remember for so long was being face down in the dirt with an aching head. I didn’t know how I got there or what had happened, but now I remember that our coach was set upon by highwaymen, and that they left me for dead, my body covered with dirt and leaves and branches. I made my way to the road, and a kindly man named Thistlehill stopped for me. He was an officer in the army, and he made sure that I was taken care of. Eventually, I married him, but he was killed in battle some years ago. I have lived on my own for years, a widow, and then… well, a few nights ago, there was a commotion in front of my house, and who did I see out there but Mr. Darcy.”

“That horrid man who thought he was better than everyone?” said her mother.

“Yes.” Elizabeth nodded. “Only, he was there with Miss de Bourgh —who is his wife now—*was* his wife. It was dreadful. I don’t know if it was the sight of him, or if it was the trauma of it. All the blood and the horror—”

“What blood and horror?” said her mother.

“Mrs. Darcy was trampled by a horse,” said Elizabeth.

“Did she survive?” said her mother, horrified.

Elizabeth shook her head.

“And this brought your memory back?” said her father.

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, for some reason it did. It all came rushing back, and I was overwhelmed. But as soon as I was able, I came back to you, back to home.”

“Thank heaven for that,” said her father. “I cannot rejoice in the tragedy of Mr. Darcy’s wife, but whatever brought you back to us is something I must be grateful for.”

Mrs. Bennet put both hands on her hips. “What about Maria Lucas?”

“I know nothing of her,” said Elizabeth. “I don’t remember what happened to her. I would have thought the highwaymen succeeded at killing her. You say she yet lives?”

“Indeed,” said Mrs. Bennet. “But in an ignominious life, to be sure. Thank heaven you were found by a gentleman.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “Yes, indeed.”

But before she could say anything further, the door was opening, and Jane was rushing across the threshold.

Elizabeth turned to see her sister there, coming for her.

“Lizzy,” said Jane.

“Jane,” said Elizabeth.

And then they were in each other’s arms.

* * *

Richard’s duties with the army were cut short when he heard the

news of Anne's demise. He went home immediately. He was worried about Darcy, remembering what had happened when Darcy had thought that Elizabeth was dead. He did not want to find a shell of a man.

The Darcy he found *was* empty in some way. He was brittle, but he was upright and moving and functional. He was not drinking himself into a stupor or hurling insults at anyone who came close to him.

Instead, Darcy was employed in caring for his small daughter. He had hired a wet nurse for the feeding of the child, but he was personally involved in nearly everything else. Richard was informed that Darcy slept in the nursery, that he woke with the babe in the night and rocked her to sleep. Indeed, when he met with Darcy, the man had fashioned a sort of sling that bound the babe to his chest, and the little infant was sleeping snug against her father.

"She was brought into this world far too soon," Darcy said to Richard. "I don't think she was ready to be separated from her mother, and so I keep her close like this. It seems to soothe her."

Richard could not argue with it. The babe did seem secure and content.

Darcy was in preparations to go back to Pemberley.

"I am in mourning," said Darcy. "There is no purpose in being in town when one is in mourning. I think little Anne will be happier there too. I shall miss your wedding, though, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, but I am not one for celebrations now, and I could not be anything but a leaden weight on your happiness. I wish you joy, however."

"Thank you," said Richard. "I think there will be joy, though you may not have thought it likely."

"I find that I don't have any rancor within me to loose upon your future wife," said Darcy. "I repent of it, truly. Perhaps I was too hard on her. Perhaps I have been too hard on everyone. Perhaps it has taken all this, the utter disintegration of my life, for me to truly realize my hubris."

"Oh, Darcy, there is no need to be that way about it," said Richard.

"If I ever made you feel as if I thought myself better than you, I repent of it, Richard," said Darcy. "I am a deplorable man indeed, and I have wrought nothing but pain upon myself and everyone else. My poor wife paid the price for my sins, but she was blameless."

"You can't blame yourself, Darcy," said Richard, even though he knew that it was no coincidence that the incident had taken place in front of Elizabeth's home.

"I do blame myself," said Darcy. "And what's more, you do too. How many times did you tell me to give Elizabeth up?"

"Well, I certainly didn't think something like this would happen," said Richard. "It *is* awful, and I mourn Anne, but I wonder, Darcy, is it

not… well, it rather solves problems for you, doesn't it?"

"Don't say such a thing," said Darcy. "My wife—our cousin—is hardly cold in the grave, and you speak of her as if she were a problem? She was a *woman*, and she was badly used by me, and—"

"Yes, of course," said Richard. "You made mistakes, Darcy, and you have been miserable, but I don't think Anne would wish you to wallow in that misery for her sake. I think she would want you to find happiness. And your daughter, she should have a mother. You have wanted to marry Elizabeth for years now. Now is your chance."

"Don't speak to me of this."

"Perhaps it's too soon to mention such a thing," Richard decided. "I am sorry if I disrespected Mrs. Darcy's memory."

"It will never be a time to speak of it," said Darcy. "I have to atone for my sins, and I think fate has spoken rather clearly on the subject of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She has refused me. She has died. She has become a woman of ill-repute. She has been bedded by you—"

"I thought we were not going to speak of—"

"And now, my association with her has killed my wife," said Mr. Darcy. "I am not meant to be with that woman. It is not my destiny. I will leave it alone now."

"Do you really believe in such things as destiny?" said Richard. Then he lifted a hand. "Never mind. Clearly, I can see that you do."

So, Darcy left London and went back to Derbyshire to atone, and Richard left him to it.

Richard was thrust immediately into the plans for his wedding. His family had been a bit miffed at his choice of a bride, a woman whose family's money came from trade. However, it was a common practice these days, they had to admit, the influx of money into titled families through marriage, and they seemed to find Caroline's slavish devotion to propriety comforting.

He would have liked to have moved the entire enterprise along. He did not think that he had been celibate for this long, well, ever, and he couldn't deny that he was experiencing a bit of frustration. How had Darcy done it, he wondered, waiting until his marriage? How was he doing it even then?

Well, Darcy was grieving, Richard supposed.

Even so, Richard had lost family members. He had been quite close to his paternal grandmother. She had died when Richard was nearly eighteen, and Richard had been devastated. He remembered that he'd drowned that devastation in cards and strong drink and women.

He and Darcy were different sorts of men and that was all there was to it.

Finally, the day of his wedding arrived.

He watched his bride be escorted down the aisle on the arm of her

brother, and she was radiant. He didn't think he'd ever seen a woman so beautiful and so pleased. He was pleased, too.

They said their vows, and she kept her eyes on him the entire time, and he could not tear his gaze away from her either.

During the wedding breakfast (which was truly taking place nearer to luncheon), they clutched hands, barely letting go of the other to eat, and he kept looking over at her and getting lost in the way her neck curved or the way the light caught her golden curls. He was mesmerized by this creature he had married, and he wasn't sure when that had happened.

Oddly, he began to feel a certain amount of apprehension.

Yes, he was frustrated and celibate, and yes, he longed for his wedding night, but he was beginning to worry about it. He had no experience with women like his wife—respectable virgins. He was sure he could execute the act, but what if it was horrible for her? He found he could not bear the idea of hurting this woman or of causing her any discomfort.

So, when they were home, in his house in town where they would be spending their wedding night before embarking on their honeymoon, he did not go to her straightaway. Instead, he sat in his own chamber, clad only in a banyan with a nightshirt and smalls on beneath, and stared into the fire, anxiously thinking through what he must do, anxiously trying to remember anything he had ever done that had wrenched a believable sound of pleasure from a woman's lips.

When he got to her room, the candles had burned low, and she was curled up in a ball in her bed.

He thought she was asleep, and he made to back out of the room, but she sat up.

"Richard," she said, running her fingers through her hair, which was down about her shoulders and hanging down her back, a glorious torrent of golden tresses, and he was undone. "I had nearly given up on you."

"My apologies," he said in a tight voice, still overcome by her beauty.

She squared her shoulders. "I'm afraid I'm a bit nervous about this. Louisa told me everything, and I must confess it all sounds impossible. I have seen that part of a man's body and there is no way that there is room for it to go in the place she says it is meant to go."

"When have you seen it?" He was affronted.

"Well, not in person, but in art," she said. "Statues, paintings, that sort of thing."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, of course." He swallowed.

"Perhaps other women are, um, larger in that area of their body.

More accommodating, but I am… I don't know. I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed."

He cleared his throat. Truly, he should laugh at this. He would be laughing if he weren't so abominably nervous. "Caroline, you mustn't worry. Indeed, it is meant to be… snug." Now his body had decided it was time to be aroused, just because of that word, and his clothes were uncomfortable. "We don't have to leap to that right away, though, in fact. There is… if I am able, there is much that can be done to, er, ease the way of my… Hang it all, let's stop speaking of this."

"Ease the way of what? Of your male organ going into me in that way? Truly? Why would Louisa leave that out?" She tilted her head. "You are just as she was, tripping over your words and embarrassed about the entire business. I don't see why."

Now, he did laugh. "No, I suppose you wouldn't, would you? That is exactly like you, Caroline."

She gave him a small smile. "It seems to me that it is entirely proper for married people to do this, isn't it? It's ordained in the Bible, after all. This is a thing people are supposed to do, so what is the point of being embarrassed?"

"I suppose it is only that it is intimate," he said. "And it involves being without clothing and people tend to feel vulnerable when they are naked, and—"

"And it's part of the curse of the Garden of Eden!" she exclaimed. "Of course. I should have realized." She shook her head. "But, you know, those naked statues don't seem a bit ashamed of their nakedness. Of course, they are often from Greek mythology, and I suppose that is a different set of gods entirely, so… well, never mind. Ought we remove our clothes, then? Perhaps before we get started, you should simply examine me and then you shall see how frightfully small I am."

He coughed. He was speechless.

She gathered up handfuls of her nightdress and then simply tugged it up over her head, exposing every inch of her bare skin to him. She was lovely, plump in all the right places and small and delicate in the others. He gaped at her, at how nicely she was put together. His entire body throbbed.

She nodded at him. "Now you."

He licked his lips. His voice came out scratchy. "I should take off my clothes, you mean?"

"Indeed. Did I not just get finished saying so?"

"If you'll forgive me, it is rather difficult to concentrate when you are… uncovered."

She blushed, and the color spread over the swells of her breasts. "You find me pleasing?"

“Quite incredibly pleasing.”

She let out a little breath. “Well, I find *that* pleasing, I must say.” She closed the distance between them. Her voice was soft now. “Do you need some assistance with what you are wearing?”

His mouth was dry. He didn’t offer a bit of resistance when she peeled his banyan away. The brush of her hands on him as she helped him remove his shirt was pleasantly scalding. He pushed his smalls out of the way and stepped out of them.

She stepped back, her mouth open, her eyes wide. “That is a great deal larger than the statues, sir.”

He laughed again.

“Don’t laugh at me.” She came closer again and took his hand. She guided it between her legs. “Here, I shall show you, and you will see that I am correct when I tell you that my body will not accommodate —*oh*.” She shut her eyes and threw her head back. “What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Good?” he breathed, stroking her.

“Unimaginably so,” she panted.

“Good,” he said again. He pressed his lips into her temple as she sagged against him.

A very long time later, when she lay beneath him on her bed, and he pressed into the slippery center of her, she seemed astonished but reassured. Everything fit just fine.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Elizabeth spent six weeks at her family's home, and she was happier than she remembered being in quite some time. She was not sure why she had put this off for so long, or why she had dallied. She wished she had not.

Quite simply, she felt whole again.

Her family was as full of foibles as ever. Her mother wasted no time in making the fact of Elizabeth's return into an ordeal from which she suffered, and she complained loudly of its affects to anyone who would listen.

Her father ignored most everything that came out of her mother's mouth and only responded to her with occasional barbs that seemed to sail directly over her mother's head. "Yes, darling, I imagine it could have gone quite better if you'd simply died the day before Lizzy had come back, and it had saved you such suffering."

"Quite so," her mother would agree. "It would be better indeed."

Her sisters all came home to see her. Both Lydia and Mary had married—Lydia recently and Mary over a year ago. Kitty was still unmarried, but she had been spending a month visiting their Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, who of course came to see Elizabeth as well.

When the Gardiners discovered how close her house was to theirs in London, they were astonished that they could have been living so near for all this time. Of course, Elizabeth had avoided them specifically, but they did not know that.

Lydia spent all of her time bragging about how she was certain that she was going to be with child sooner than her friend Mrs. Longenster, who had married a month before Lydia. "Oh, la, won't it be a lark when I am increasing before she is. I am quite sure I can manage it."

Mary lost no time in scolding Lydia whenever such a topic came up. "It is quite unbecoming to speak of such things in proper society, Lydia. You must be sober about such things and keep them to yourself."

"I was only speaking of children," Lydia protested. "I know not why your mind went elsewhere, but that is surely indicative of your own wickedness."

"Why would that be wicked?" said Kitty. "I feel as if everyone

knows something that I don't simply because they are married, and I can't bear it. It's horrid that Lydia married before me anyway. I am older than she!"

Jane was long suffering and serene, as she always had been, but her marriage to Mr. Bingley seemed to complete her in such a way that Elizabeth could not help but be stunned by it. She doted on her two children, and she loved her husband who also loved her.

In the end, Elizabeth was happy to have her own house, for—as much as she had missed her family—there was something to be said for having a bit of a break from one's relations now and then. Elizabeth returned to London after six weeks, and soon the Bingleys came to London as well.

Elizabeth was brought into their society and into the society of the Gardiners. She was invited to dinners and the opera and even balls, and she did not feel lonely at all.

Months passed, and she settled into her new life very easily. Word spread of her ordeal, and everyone thought her story was extraordinary, but no one challenged it.

She felt so secure that she even began to visit Maria now and then. She was not willing to sacrifice her friendship with her for the sake of propriety.

She did not see Mr. Darcy, who had retired to the country with his infant daughter, but she did see Colonel Fitzwilliam from time to time, because he and his new wife were guests of the Bingleys for dinner every so often and because their social calendar overlapped.

When she saw the colonel, she did not ask after Mr. Darcy, and the colonel did not volunteer any information about him.

Eventually, spring faded to summer and summer to fall. Then winter began to steal through London, and an entire year had passed.

Now, it had been five years since the highwaymen had accosted her carriage, since her life had been destroyed. And now, she thought that she could put it all behind her, finally, at long last.

* * *

Mr. Darcy was seated on the floor of the nursery in his shirtsleeves, holding out his hands encouragingly. "Come on, then, little Anne," he urged the chubby-legged little girl who was holding onto a chair a few feet away.

Anne Darcy was now just over a year old, and she was a bright-eyed, pretty tiny one who was busily working on her ability to walk. Some babes might have mastered it by now, but she had been born early, so Darcy thought she was right on time.

"It's all right, then," said Darcy. "Come over here to your papa."

Anne giggled, giving him a bright smile. Then she plopped down on the floor and began crawling toward him.

"That's just fine," he told her. "You get here one way or the other. You'll be using those little legs in no time, though, I wager."

"That she will, sir," said Anne's nanny, coming in the door.

He turned to face her. "Mrs. Noble, I thought I told you to take the rest of the afternoon to yourself. I can see to my daughter fine on my own." He turned back to her. "Can't I, little Anne? Yes, I can."

"Oh, of that I have no doubt," said Mrs. Noble. "But there is someone here to see you, sir, and I thought I would watch her while you went to see your guest."

Anne climbed onto his lap, babbling and cooing.

He hoisted her up as he got to his feet, holding her high in the air as she screamed with laughter. "But I'm not expecting anyone, am I?" he cooed to her. "I'm not expecting anyone at all."

"It is Mrs. Darcy's former maid," said Mrs. Noble. "Miss Bronson."

"Oh, yes," said Darcy, lowering little Anne. "She had mentioned wanting to come by to collect her things. Mrs. Reynolds informed me. But why does she need to speak to me about it? I have no qualms about her collecting whatever is hers. I certainly do not need to supervise her."

"I couldn't say, sir. She seems rather nervous and insisted you be sent for."

Darcy shook his head. "Very well."

Mrs. Noble held out her hands for the baby, and Mr. Darcy handed his daughter over.

He met Miss Bronson in a sitting room. She was not seated, but standing behind a sofa, clutching her hands together in front of her body, her face looking drawn and pale.

"Heavens," said Mr. Darcy. "You seem to be in some distress, madam. Whatever could be the matter?"

"I feel the need to tell you something, sir," she said. "I must admit that I hid this information from you because of a weakness on my own part. The man in question has a way about him, sir. A way that is, well, sometimes quite compelling."

Darcy furrowed his brow. "Of whom are we speaking, Miss Bronson?"

"Of Mr. Wickham, sir. Mr. George Wickham."

Darcy's jaw twitched. He drew himself up. "What of him?" he said in a different voice.

"You should know, sir, it wasn't a coincidence that sent poor Mrs. Darcy after you that night."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he met with her, more than once. I saw it with my own eyes. He would come to the servants' door at the house in town and he would ask for money, but then he would make pointed comments

about your behavior. He stirred up her suspicion."

"It happens that her suspicions were warranted, Miss Bronson." He could not meet the eyes of his former employee. She had come to work at Pemberley when Anne had married him, but before she had served Anne at Rosings.

"That is neither here nor there," she said.

"Isn't it?"

"Well, he was doing it on purpose, and he has admitted it to me," she said. "I have gotten sick of him, of Mr. Wickham. He has come to me, over the years, but he is always asking for something, and he never pays back his loans. I have come to see him in a different light, and I think he did it with real malice."

Mr. Darcy sighed. "I can't say I'm surprised by that."

"Well, I repent of anything I did to help him. He could convince me of too much with a wink and one of his charming smiles. I am lucky that I wasn't so swept away by it that I let him lay a hand on me, though. I know servants here were always divided about him. Some remembered him as a good boy and a friend and others murmured that he had done things to Miss Darcy—well, Mrs. Graysmith now."

Darcy had always been too tight-lipped about Wickham, hadn't he? He should have made his household aware of the danger at least.

"When he used to come to Rosings—"

"Wait, what?" said Darcy. "When was Wickham at Rosings?"

"Only once or twice," she said. "He would find me and wish to know all sorts of information about you and about Miss Bennet—"

"This was when Miss Bennet was staying at the rectory there?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

"But what was he doing in that part of the country?"

"Was he not meant to be there, sir?"

"He was meant to be serving in the regiment in the militia," said Darcy forcefully.

"Well, I could not speak of that, I'm afraid."

Darcy waved this away. So, Wickham had found his way to Kent on occasion. He shouldn't be surprised, he supposed. "Wickham wanted to know information? What kind of information?"

"Oh, he was quite curious about how often you met her, and how long you stayed to visit, and then when he heard that she was leaving by post chaise, he wanted to know a great deal about that, including the time they would leave and everything else."

Darcy felt as if he had been doused in a freezing waterfall.

No, it couldn't be.

Wickham couldn't have…

Well, here was evidence he'd engineered Anne's discovery of him with Elizabeth, which meant that some of the blame for wife's death—

not all of it, mind—must be laid at Wickham's feet.

What if more could be laid at Wickham's feet as well?

Darcy thought back to that story that Maria Lucas had told. It had never made any sense. Why had Wickham been in London and not with the regiment? Why had he been there just in time to kill the women's capturers? He had "rescued" them but only at the price of Elizabeth's favors. Had that been by his design as well?

If so, it wasn't fate that destroyed Darcy's life at all.

It wasn't destiny.

It was one man.

George blazing Wickham.

"Where did you say you saw Mr. Wickham last, Miss Bronson?" said Darcy in a tight voice.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mr. Darcy decided it would be better if Mr. Wickham came to him, if he had his dealings with the man on his own property, and his own land. Typically, he wouldn't have resorted to a ruse to get the man's attention. It was surely a villainous thing to trick the man, to send out a falsehood, but Mr. Darcy found he didn't care. For all of Wickham's terrible deeds, he didn't deserve anything better.

His only true concern was that Wickham could not be so terribly stupid as to fall for it.

And yet, it seemed that Wickham's greed outpaced his intelligence, and he did come.

When Mr. Darcy got news that the man had arrived, he gave word not to allow the man inside and made Wickham wait on the steps while Darcy got himself together. Then went out of the door and met Wickham on the steps to Pemberley.

"Mr. Wickham," he said. "Let's go for a walk on the grounds."

"A walk?" Wickham raised his eyebrows. "It's a bit cold, isn't it?"

Darcy shrugged. "I like the brisk air. It's not too much for you, is it? You haven't developed some womanish inability to deal with a bit of a chill breeze?"

Wickham drew himself up. "Of course not. But see here, Darcy, I was told that you had something for me. They said you found a bequest left to me your late father—"

"Let's walk," said Darcy shortly. "We'll talk on the way."

So, they walked, and Darcy kept his answers brief until they were far enough away that the trees had swallowed up any sight of Pemberley. When they came to a brook, swollen from recent snow melt, Darcy stopped. He looked off into the distance and took a deep breath.

"There is no money, is there?" said Wickham in a dark voice.

"No," said Darcy.

"Why am I here, then?"

"You're going to convince me that you didn't arrange for Miss Elizabeth Bennet's post chaise to be set upon by highwaymen. Speak as if your life depends upon it, Wickham, because it does."

Wickham looked him over. He glanced at the brook, rushing by on

one side and then towards Pemberley, from which they had come. "This is hardly honorable, Darcy. If you have a grievance with me, you should challenge me."

"A challenge is issued to a gentleman," said Darcy. "And you are not a gentleman, no matter how much you want to pretend you are."

"No, I suppose not," said Wickham. "But have you ever thought what it was like for me, raised at your side, but then thrust out into the world with nothing?"

"I did think of that, yes," said Darcy. "I thought of that when I gave you *thousands of pounds* in lieu of a position in the rectory, as my father wished for you. And how did you pay me back for that? You attacked my innocent sister."

"I never so much as looked down Georgiana's bodice," said Wickham.

"No, but you did that and more to Miss Bennet," said Darcy. "You ravished her. She had no choice but to submit to you, and for that, you should hang. I would turn you over to the law if I didn't think making your misdeeds public would only cause more pain to the women you have already trespassed against."

"I never hurt Lizzy." Wickham laughed. "I wager she still has dreams of how much she liked it."

Darcy's nostrils flared. "Convince me it was only that, Wickham, and I shall give you the gift of your life, which is more than you deserve. But I shall do it out of the memory of our boyhood. Did you arrange for Miss Bennet's carriage to be attacked?"

"How would I have managed that?"

"You probably offered them money," said Mr. Darcy. "But then you had no way to pay them, so you killed them, pretending to 'rescue' Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

"Is it true?"

Wickham only shook his head. "It sounds like a lot of scheming, Fitzwilliam."

"You hate me a great deal, though, don't you? And you knew, apparently, how I felt about Miss Bennet, because you had that from Miss Bronson, as she told me. She said you were quite interested in all of that. You had already formed some kind of design on Miss Bennet, flirting with her in Hertfordshire. You already lusted after her. The idea that ruining her would also be taking something from me, well, that just made it all more sweet."

"I didn't do it to get under her skirts," said Wickham. "I can find somewhere to wet my prick easily enough without so much effort."

"So, you admit it?"

"She refused you." Wickham sneered at him.

"Likely because of *you*," said Darcy.

"Yes," said Wickham. "She refused you, and I wanted to have her—lift her skirts when you couldn't. The fact it would ruin her and take her from you forever, that made it better. And then…" He laughed. "The right mess it all made of your life, well, that's inspired, isn't it?"

Darcy reached inside his jacket and drew out his pistol.

Wickham straightened. "You're just going to shoot me, then?"

"You deserve it," said Darcy.

Wickham squared his shoulders. "Oh, fine. I don't care. I might welcome it. What is there for me, anyway? I tell you, Fitzwilliam, I don't fit. I'm not a gentleman, as you said, but I've tasted too much of the sweet life to ever truly be satisfied with my own station. When your father took me in, he signed my death warrant. I've known it for some time now."

"You don't get to blame other people for the fact that you're a *rapist*."

"I never did that. I told you, she was willing enough. She was even grateful, and she enjoyed herself."

Darcy closed the distance between them and put the barrel of the pistol against Wickham's forehead.

Wickham closed his eyes. "I haven't got anything to live for anyway. I get money, and then I piss it away. I have no one who cares about me. Everyone who did is sick to death of my coming and begging from them. I'm in debt to both good people and bad. And my scheme with Elizabeth, it never did work out. I wanted to send her out and make arrangements with gents, but she never was too willing to work with me for some reason, likely things *you* told her. So, it was only once with her, in the end, and it was so long ago that it hardly matters. I'm told you fixed her right up, anyway. That house in the respectable part of town, that story. Mrs. Thistlehill. She's all right. I don't know why you care."

"She's not all right. She's never going to be all right. Things you did, to her, to me, to all the people you hurt, they have left their marks."

"Well, do it, then. I want it over. Lights out." Wickham sucked in a breath, steeling himself.

Darcy's finger tensed on the trigger.

It was quiet, except for the distant sound of squawking birds, almost an echo of Wickham's voice.

Wickham swallowed. "I have nothing to live for." His voice shook.

"Damnation," said Darcy, pulling the gun back and pointing it at the sky.

Wickham opened his eyes cautiously.

"If I ever hear of you hurting another woman, I *shall* kill you," said

Darcy.

Wickham took a wary step backward.

“I shall hunt you down,” said Darcy. “I shall not show you any mercy.”

Wickham took another step backward.

“You don’t deserve this, Wickham. You don’t deserve any of this from me.”

Abruptly, Wickham turned and started to sprint. He took off running away from Darcy, as fast as he could.

Darcy watched until the man was enveloped in the trees, until he could see no more sign of him.

Then he turned and trudged back to Pemberley.

“I want to go to London tomorrow,” he told the servants. “Get everything ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I owe you an apology."

Elizabeth stood in the doorway to her home, staring at Mr. Darcy, who was just there, after all this time. She gaped at him, unsure of what to say, especially since he hadn't come out with the typical sort of greetings one would give in such a circumstance.

"May I come in to do so?" said Mr. Darcy. "If you'd rather, I'm willing to it on your doorstep, of course. I can't see why you'd invite me in after what I said to you the last time we spoke."

She tilted her head to one side. She was astonished. She was unable to speak. Wordlessly, she stepped away from the doorway and gestured for him to enter.

He did.

She shut the door.

"It was never your fault, what happened to my wife," said Mr. Darcy. "I should never have said that it was."

She found her voice. "Did you say it was my fault? I don't know if I remember that. You seemed rather intent on blaming yourself if I recall correctly."

"Yes, well, it wasn't my fault either," said Darcy. "I said that *we* killed her, and we didn't."

She smiled at him. "If this is what you came to say, you needn't have been so dramatic about it. A letter would have sufficed. Of course, I have always know what occurred was a tragic accident."

"No, no," said Mr. Darcy. "There was *someone* at fault."

She was taken aback. "There was? What do you mean?"

"I had a confession from my late wife's maid. She came and told me that Mr. Wickham would visit the late Mrs. Darcy, and he was the one who encouraged her suspicions and who likely drove her to come and find us that night."

"Oh," said Elizabeth. "Well, that is dreadful, but—"

"There's more," said Darcy, looking away. "It might not be easy for you to hear, but I think you must. Wickham set those highwaymen on your coach. He manufactured all of it, so that he could… could violate you."

Elizabeth's lips parted slowly.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Darcy. "I know it is true, because he confessed it to me. He did not give me all the particulars, but when I laid it out for him, he did not contradict me. He offered the highwaymen payment, and then—because he did not have the money—he killed them. In this way, he pretended to rescue you, but he had engineered all of it."

"All of it just to… to tup me?"

"I know I told you I would kill him," said Mr. Darcy. "I did try. I… I don't know, he is such a pathetic creature, and I find that my bloodthirsty nature is not equal to the task. But if you wish it, I shall do it. I do not feel he deserves life—"

"You tried to kill him?"

He flinched. "Do you disapprove? Any magistrate would have strung that man up for what he did. I'm not sorry, and if you have any pity for him—"

"No, I didn't say that," she said. "And I would not have you get your own hands bloody for my sake." She rubbed her forehead. "Certainly, it cannot all have been about me. Why would he care so much?"

"Well, it was also about me. He knew that I had asked for your hand and that you had refused me."

"Ah." She nodded. "By ruining me, he took something that you wanted, and he made it so that you could never have it."

"He is hateful," said Darcy. "It's his fault. It's *all* his fault, everything that's happened. It was not providence or some bad fortune that befell you, it was malice. I thought it was fate, intervening, telling me that we were not meant to be together."

"But it was Wickham," she said quietly. "It was him, all along."

"Yes," he said. "And I'm not letting that man take anything else from us."

She licked her lips. "I don't…"

"When Anne died, I thought… I blamed myself, and I thought that I must not be rewarded for bringing about such a calamity. I thought that I must be separated from you, because our association had caused nothing but pain and suffering."

"Yes, I know that's what you felt."

"But hang all that," said Darcy. "It was *Wickham*. And I want you to marry me."

She barked out a disbelieving laugh. *What* was it that he had just said?

Darcy cleared his throat. "Oh, that came out rather frightfully, didn't it? My apologies. Elizabeth Bennet, you are the only woman that I have ever loved, and I have loved you to distraction and to ruin, and I shall never stop loving you. We have been through nothing but

pain, and there is no reason for us to bring any more on ourselves. Frankly, it's painful to be away from you, and I don't wish to be away from you ever again. So, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Fitz, I… are you sure you wish to bind yourself to one such as me? What if all this comes out? You did not kill Wickham, and he is still out there. What if he decides to air this story, tell everyone about my past?"

"Then we shall deny it," said Darcy. "And given my station and his station and his grievances against me, no one will believe he is not lying."

"But someone might, and if they do—"

"I don't care what anyone thinks," he said. "I want nothing in the world as much as I want you. Please, tell me you will be mine."

She gazed at him, shaking her head. Then, a helpless laugh escaped her lips. "Of course I'll marry you," she said. "How could I not, indeed?"

He let out a relieved breath. "Oh, thank heavens. I was beginning to think you were going to refuse me again."

She laughed again. "I have always regretted refusing you, Fitzwilliam."

"No more regrets, Elizabeth." He took her hands in his.

"None," she agreed.

And this time when he kissed her, he didn't pull away. Instead, their kiss deepened, and a feeling welled up in her, like the sound of bells on a crisp, clear morning, and she was overcome.

She clung to his lapels, opening her mouth to him, and he was sweetness and joy and everything good—everything she had been afraid to let herself feel for too long.

He was her own Fitzwilliam Darcy, her only love, and she kissed him as if she never meant to let him go, because she didn't.

* * *

The most difficult part of the announcement that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were getting married seemed to be that almost everyone was completely surprised by it. No one in Elizabeth's family had been apprised that Mr. Darcy had asked her to marry him before. Years ago, she had not wished to put such a thing in a letter, and had decided she would tell Jane when she saw her again. And then, she had never seen Jane again until just recently.

So, every person in her family seemed to say something similar.

"Mr. Darcy? I didn't think you liked him."

"Well," Elizabeth would say, "I do. Rather a great deal, in fact."

"I don't see why he would come and ask you to marry him. Didn't you only become reacquainted when his late wife was tragically

killed? Certainly such an event doesn't breed romance."

"In truth, Mr. Darcy and I have a further history. Many years ago at Rosings, he asked for my hand."

"Truly? How odd. I suppose he did seem rather intent on finding both you and Maria Lucas all those years ago, more intent than did seem warranted, but he never mentioned that you were his fiancee."

"Oh, I refused him then. You see, back then I did not like him."

"But you like him now?"

"Yes."

There was only one exception of her family members, and that was her mother, who only said, "Lizzy, darling, ten thousand a year! What a man, my darling, what a man, indeed!"

Everyone was confused, but they could see how happy she was, and they accepted it. Mr. Darcy's side of the family was less perplexed, having known how deeply he had been affected by her "death." Elizabeth met Georgiana—now Mrs. Graysmith—for the first time, and she was nervous about it all, but Mrs. Graysmith was a charming girl who seemed only to wish her brother happiness, claiming that she herself was absorbed in marital bliss and wanted the same for all.

"And besides," said Mrs. Graysmith, "little Anne needs a mother."

Elizabeth had trepidation about that notion as well, of course, for there was something about it that made her feel as if it might anger the late Mrs. Darcy's spirit. The way she had died, there had been no reconciliation of her hurt and anger. She had rushed from the house hating both Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, and surely she would not wish Elizabeth as a mother to her child.

When she spoke of such things to Mr. Darcy, he simply waved it away, repeating that he blamed Mr. Wickham for it all and that surely his late wife would too.

But Elizabeth knew it was not so simple, and she doubted the late Mrs. Darcy would have laid the blame so neatly.

Even so, the little girl was alive and in need of love, and her mother was gone, as tragic as that was. In truth, when Elizabeth clapped eyes on the small girl, she couldn't help but fall in love with her. She was an adorable, charming child, expressive in her babbling, which she did with the graveness of a mistress conveying her wishes to the household. Occasionally, a word or two mixed in—usually Papa or Nana, which was what she called her nanny. She also had an approximation for a few different sorts of animals, and she was delighted by pictures of them.

Elizabeth soon began spending every afternoon in little Anne's nursery along with Mr. Darcy, and she was there to witness the little girl take her first steps on her adorably chubby little legs, and she wasn't sure whether she was more charmed by Anne's obvious delight

in her accomplishment or the little girl's father's reaction. Mr. Darcy was jubilant, and it warmed her heart in a way that also made her eyes sting.

Perhaps this would not be the typical marriage, or the typical path to a family, but she did not care, because nothing about her life had been typical for quite some time. There was so much love in her life now that she could not but help feeling as if she lived in a waking dream of goodness.

One afternoon, after little Anne had gone down for a nap, she and Mr. Darcy found themselves alone in his bedchamber because they had been inspecting the suit that Mr. Darcy would wear for the wedding, which was five days hence.

If the situation had been different, if she hadn't been a widow, and if they had not been in the habit of spending large amounts of time alone together, Elizabeth supposed she would never have been admitted to his bedchamber.

Indeed, she could not help but feel a bit of a thrill at it, looking around his private space, a space she had never been welcomed inside. Her gaze settled on the bed, and a wicked set of thoughts flew through her head, and she felt herself flushing.

"Well," she said, "I suppose we should, er, return to the sitting room or I should take my leave of you."

Mr. Darcy chuckled. "Yes, perhaps it is utterly inappropriate to have brought you to my bedchamber. What could I have been thinking?"

She smiled at him. "I know you, Fitz, and you were thinking nothing untoward. You are so very capable of staying in control of your prurient desires, after all, as I remember you telling me."

He came closer to her. "Yes, indeed, but I must say, Lizzy, that the effect you have had on me is a gradual wearing down of all my defenses. I am not sure how strong they are anymore."

She laughed. "I'm sure you are veritable fortress."

"Are you?" He reached up and placed his palm against her cheek.

She shut her eyes, enjoying the warmth and affection of his touch. "Quite sure. I know that you take the sanctity of marriage quite seriously."

"Mmm." His lips pressed into her forehead.

She shivered.

"However," he said in a low voice, "there were a great many barriers between us before, not least of which the fact that our union would have caused pain for ourselves and others, and none of that is true anymore."

"What are you saying?" she whispered, peering up at him. "Our wedding day is but five days from now. Surely, we can wait five more

days."

"Oh, I'm sure we *could*…" He kissed her, and there was heat in the kiss, heat like she'd never felt from him, a blistering promise of everything that was to come.

"Fitz!" She was scolding him, but she was not actually displeased. Instead she felt… oh, pleasantly bothered, as if her clothes had become just a bit too tight. "You are not serious about this."

He reached up and began to untie his cravat, shrugging elegantly with his very broad shoulders, and her curiosity about seeing them bared suddenly seemed to take on a certain urgency.

She bit down on her bottom lip, and then thrust out her hands to unbutton his jacket.

He chuckled low in his throat, pulling his cravat free.

She had his jacket unbuttoned and she pushed it over his shoulders.

He went at the buttons on his waistcoat, and she helped him. In seconds, that was off of him too, and then he was shedding his shirt beneath it all, and his chest was utterly bare.

She drew in a sharp of breath, looking him over appreciatively. He was so very lean and sinuous, with a light bit of dark hair over the top of his chest. His stomach was flat, and she found herself wanting to see all of him. She put her hands of his shoulders, spanning the breadth of them. She dragged them down over his chest, and he was warm and firm.

He let out a shaky breath.

She echoed him, going to work on unfastening his trousers.

He laughed, a strangled breathy sound. "You are seemingly very eager for someone who was protesting a moment ago."

"It has only that it has been so long that we have been holding this back," she gasped. "But if you wish to stop—"

"I don't think I said anything to indicate that," he said in a harsh voice.

She pushed down his trousers and his smalls and uncovered him, and all the air went out of her with a whoosh.

"Oh," she breathed.

He swallowed.

"I should have known it would be beautiful," she whispered.

He flushed. "Are you talking about my…?"

She wrapped her hand around him. He was proud, thick, and curved when erect, and she didn't think she'd seen anything quite so pleasing in her entire life.

Mr. Darcy made a noise that was almost a laugh and almost a sigh.

She kissed him again.

He groaned into her mouth.

She pulled away. "I think I want to give it a kiss."

"Lizzy, you—"

She squeezed him, and his words cut off abruptly. "If you object, say something." She pushed him towards his bed.

"I… of course, I…"

She put both of her palms on his chest and shoved.

He fell backwards and landed on the bed, gazing up at her in astonishment.

She giggled and climbed over him, kneeling over him. She kissed the tip of him.

He rewarded her with an unbridled, guttural noise.

She ran her tongue over the underside of him.

"Lizzy…" he grunted. "You don't have to do that."

"I *want* to do that," she said. "But if you dislike it—"

"I didn't say that I…" He groaned again, out of breath. "*Lord.*"

She planted another wet kiss on the tip of him. "If there *is* anything that is displeasing you—"

"Well, I don't know how it has happened that you are entirely clothed while I am… not."

She giggled again.

He sat up on the bed and reached around her to begin working on her buttons.

She kissed his mouth.

His fingers moved deftly over the back of her dress and they kissed and kissed, and she got lost in the feeling of his tongue stroking hers, and that sweet, wonderful warmth between them intensified.

She wriggled out of her dress, and he started to unlace her stays, and she put her hands on him again.

Very soon, she was only wearing her shift, and his hands were moving over the thin fabric, finding her breasts, teasing them through the fabric, and the sensation of that was so pleasant that she forgot everything except it and gave herself over entirely to him, shrugging out of her shift so that she was as bare as he was.

His mouth moved away from hers and made a trail over her body, and he kissed and suckled until she found herself to the be one lying on her back on the bed, and his mouth was moving over her waist, and then over the swell of her belly, and then lower still… and when his lips brushed her between her thighs, she was stunned at how delicious that was.

"I don't think…" she managed. Her voice was ravaged with the pleasure of it. "Simply because I did that to you doesn't mean that it would work the other way around."

He chuckled against her skin, and it vibrated through her sensitive flesh. "No, I can assure you, it's not an uncommon practice."

She lifted her head to look down at him. "Are you certain?"

“Quite,” he said, and then he did something with his tongue that was so very clever that all thoughts were wiped out from her mind, and she could only attempt to gasp for breath, eyes squeezed shut and body taut and bowed.

She found herself wondering how it was that Mr. Darcy would know such a thing when she knew that he had not taken anyone to bed but his wife, but then she thought that his primary objection to such a thing had been something about getting women with child, and she wondered if that meant that he had done other things besides…

And then the thought was swallowed away in further pleasure, because whatever he was doing, he was obviously rather skilled at it.

Pleasure came for her, barreling down on her like a distant stampede that grew closer and closer until it was all around, surrounding her, and her body broke as hooves hit the ground and reverberated through her again and again. Then it galloped on, leaving behind nothing but tiny aftershocks in its wake, and she was left panting as he crawled up to kiss her mouth.

She clung to him, wrapping her legs around him, pulling him close. She wanted him closer. She could not get him close enough.

“You…” She wanted to tell him, but she couldn’t find words. “That was… I…”

“Shh,” he murmured, raining kisses over her face, kissing her chin and her jaw and her temple and her earlobe.

“I never did that in the company of a man before,” she breathed. “Or the company of anyone for that matter. I—*oh!*” And then she broke off in embarrassment at what she’d admitted about what she did when she was alone.

And he had drawn up from her, a foot of space between them, and he was regarding her.

“I’ve shocked you,” she said regretfully. “I know it’s likely not proper to engage in such things on one’s own—”

“No, Lizzy, I don’t care about that.” He laughed a little, but then he grew serious. “I’m only sad that you should have been so used. That no one would think to give any care to your pleasure. It is…” He bent down and kissed her between her breasts. “On the other hand, it maybe alleviates a bit of pressure on me.”

“Pressure?” she repeated.

He kissed the tip of one of her breasts. “I am not at all jealous of whatever is in your past, and I don’t care about any of it.”

She gasped.

He kissed the other tip. “But I did feel a shadow of it, a concern that I would be… not enough… or that there would be—”

“Nothing has ever felt like this,” she cut him off.

He lifted his gaze to hers. “Nor for me.”

She smiled at him, almost shy.

"I have been waiting for you, I think, and I have always known that being with you would tower over any other experience I had ever had."

"Yes," she said. "I knew it would be powerful. I was frightened of how powerful it would be."

He kissed her lips. "Are you frightened now?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

He shifted between her thighs, and she gasped. "I might be a bit frightened," he murmured. "I do not think I have ever wanted anything quite this badly."

"Take it," she ordered, suddenly desperate for him. "Take *me*. Now."

He groaned again, softly, and then reached between their bodies and guided himself to her opening.

She shut her eyes as he filled her.

He gasped.

She gasped. She opened her eyes to look at him. This was… she had been with men before, too many men, but this felt… She had never been entered when she was so sensitive and slick, so swollen and tender from having already reached an apex, and this felt different, so incredibly different, so very, very *good*.

He was gazing into her eyes, and his expression laid him bare to her.

She touched his face.

He grunted.

They started to move together, as if their bodies were communicating somehow, as if words were no longer necessary because their bodies worked together in perfect harmony.

Another height of pleasure began to build in her, almost immediately, and it was intense. Perhaps she had never felt something so intense.

He buried his face in her shoulder as he moved against her, and he whispered things—words, maybe, she didn't know, she couldn't concentrate on that. All she knew was that this was right, this was good, this was *everything*.

The pleasure built and built, and she ran her fingers over his back and clutched his shoulders, and gasped and urged him on, and when the pleasure came for her, she surrendered to it, and then, seconds later, she could feel him inside her, twitching in time as well, an echo of her own release.

Somehow, she felt then as if she had come undone, and that they were mingling together, becoming part of each other, as if they were no longer separate beings, but that they had come together in such a

way that they had been transformed.

She held tight to him, and he pressed against her, and their breathing fell into a pattern together.

She didn't want to be parted from him, because she was frightened that she would lose this feeling, that she would no long feel this connection to him.

But strangely, when they did part, and when they drew on their clothes and he walked her through the hallways of his house so that she could go, as was only proper, since they were not yet wed, she still felt her tie to him, as if there were strong cords from his body to hers, tethering them together.

She knew then that the bonds between them would never be broken.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Derbyshire
June, 1821

Richard smiled out at the lawn, watching his own daughters run around the bushes in the gardens of Pemberley with his cousin Darcy's daughters. He and Caroline had come for a long visit, something they usually did in the summer. It wasn't always easy traveling with the girls, but they were also so very excited to see their cousins that they endured the journey well enough.

Sometimes, Richard could not believe that things had turned out as they had. Years ago, he would never have thought that he would find himself wed to the former Miss Caroline Bingley, or that the two of them would be as happy as they were. She truly was his perfect match, and he was a lucky man.

And Darcy and his wife, well, that had seemed impossible for so very long. But despite Darcy's ramblings of fate and destiny, it was obvious he'd been wrong to think that he was not meant for his wife. Elizabeth and Darcy were very clearly perfect for each other. They were the picture of wedded bliss, and he had never seen a couple more content with each other.

"The children have so much energy," said his wife Caroline. "I don't know where they get it."

"I think it comes from feeding them," said Elizabeth, who was holding her newest addition, a little girl named Laura. "I have spoken to their nurse about it, but she says it is necessary, more's the pity."

Caroline burst out laughing. "Oh, Mrs. Darcy, the *things* you say."

Elizabeth laughed too. "No, I am but joking, of course. Their boundless energy is a good thing. Little girls have a great deal of energy, after all, and I should know, because I have now been surrounded by them my entire life."

"Oh, yes, what with all your younger sisters," said Caroline.

"Yes, and now I have four daughters," said Elizabeth, smiling. Richard noted that she counted little Anne, the eldest, amongst that number, and he was glad of it. Indeed, he'd often noted the family was as seamless as a family could be, and he thought they were quite

happy.

"Do not ask us when when will try for a boy," spoke up Mr. Darcy.

"I wasn't going to ask that," said Richard. He and Caroline had two girls, and they were often asked the same question. Richard wasn't sure why, when he had nothing for a son to inherit.

"I have quite a number of properties that are not entailed," said Mr. Darcy. "If Pemberley passes from my offspring, so be it. They shall survive."

"Indeed, we are quite pleased with girls," said Elizabeth.

"As are we," said Caroline, with a smile.

"Yes," Richard agreed. "We are. Although I do not have quite a number of properties."

"Even so, our girls will do quite well, I think," said Caroline. "Truly, I cannot bring myself to care when they are healthy and sweet, and when I love them all so."

"Yes, I quite agree with that sentiment," said Elizabeth.

"Sometimes," said Caroline, "I wake in the morning, and I think to myself that I am so very, very lucky to have all that I have. My wonderful husband and my beautiful children, and… well, I am quite overcome by it all."

Elizabeth smiled at her. "When I first met you, Mrs. Fitzwilliam, I am not sure I would have believed I could have ever heard you say such a thing."

"Ah, well, we were all so young then," said Caroline. "So much has happened in the ensuing years. Much of it was dreadful, but it has all turned out right in the end."

"True," said Darcy. "And it is all the sweeter for the knowledge of the misery and pain that came before."

"Yes," agreed Richard, looking back out at the lawn.

The little girls, they were a testament to all that they had struggled against—wars and violence and reputations and highwaymen and the actions of wicked men. Their lives had not been easy, but they had fought and won their happiness. He could not say that it was not deserved.

He reached over to take his wife's hand, squeezing her fingers.

She turned to him, beaming.

Darcy smiled at Richard over Caroline's head.

Richard lifted his chin.

Then they all turned back to the lawn and their offspring, laughing amongst the green grass and flowers. Truly, there was nothing sweeter on the green earth. Nothing at all.

* * *

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